

The Boy Allies in the Trenches

Clair Wallace Hayes

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The Boy Allies In The Trenches

OR

Midst Shot and Shell along the Aisne

By CLAIR W. HAYES

AUTHOR OF "The Boy Allies At Liege" "The Boy Allies On the Firing Line"
"The Boy Allies With the Cossacks"

1915

CHAPTER I.

WITH THE ARMY.

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"Well! Well! Well! If it isn't Lieutenant Paine and Lieutenant Crawford!"

The speaker, none other than Field Marshal Sir John French, commander-in-chief of the British forces sent to help France hurl back the legions of the German invader, was greatly surprised by the appearance of the two lads before him.

"I thought surely you had been killed," continued General French.

"We are not to be killed so easily, sir," replied Hal Paine.

"And where have you been?" demanded the General.

"In Russia, sir," replied Chester Crawford, "where we were attached to a Cossack regiment, and where we saw considerable fighting."

General French uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"How did you get there?" he asked. "And how did you return?"

"Airship," was Hal's brief response, and he related their adventures since they had last seen their commander.

Hal then tendered the General a despatch he carried from the Grand Duke Nicholas, commander-in-chief of all the Russian armies operating against the Germans in the eastern theater of war.

"You shall serve on my staff," said General French finally.

He summoned another officer and ordered that quarters be prepared for the two lads immediately.

And while the two boys are getting themselves comfortably fixed it will be a good time to introduce the lads to such readers as have not made their acquaintance before.

Hal Paine and Chester Crawford, two American lads, their ages being about 18 and 19, had seen considerable service in the great European war--the greatest war of all time. They had been in Berlin when Germany had declared war upon Russia and France and with Hal's mother had attempted to make their way from that country. The mother had been successful; but Hal and Chester got into trouble and had been left behind.

Fortunately, however, two young officers, Major Raoul Derevaux, a Frenchman, and Captain Harry Anderson, an Englishman, had come to their assistance--reciprocating a good turn done them by the two lads a day before--and together, after some difficulties, they succeeded in reaching Liege, Belgium, just in time to take part in its heroic defense against the first German hordes that violated the neutrality of the little buffer country.

Both had distinguished themselves by their coolness and bravery under fire, and had found favor in the eyes of the Belgian commander, as related in "The Boy Allies at Liege." Later they had rendered themselves invaluable in carrying dispatches.

Following their adventures in this campaign they saw service with the British forces on the continent, as told in "The Boy Allies on the Firing Line." In this campaign they had been instrumental in foiling a

well-planned German coup, which would have resulted in a severe blow to the British had it been put through.

Also, while scouting in the enemy's domain, Hal and Chester had unearthed a conspiracy that threatened the destruction of a whole French army corps. By prompt action the lads prevented this and won the congratulations of General Joffre, the French commander-in-chief.

It was through information gleaned by the lads that the British army was finally able to surprise the enemy and advance to the east shore of the River Marne, after a struggle that had lasted for two weeks.

In a battle following this decisive engagement--while returning from a successful raid--Captain Harry Anderson, who had accompanied them, was critically wounded and, together with Hal and Chester, taken prisoner. Hal and Chester, with a French army dog they had rescued from the wrath of a German officer, were taken almost immediately to Berlin.

There, while strolling about the street one day in company with the German officer in whose charge they had been placed, they were made, to their surprise, the bearer of an important communication to the Russian commander-in-chief. It happened in this wise:

An English prisoner, recognizing them, made a dash for liberty and succeeded in passing the document to Chester. The lad secreted it. Finally, through their resourcefulness, the lads managed to make their escape from the German capital and reached the Russian lines by means of an airship.

Here they put the document into the hands of Grand Duke Nicholas, who, at their request, assigned them to a regiment of Cossacks.

The lads immediately made a good friend of a huge Cossack, Alexis Verhoff, a man of immense prowess and great strength, and with him saw a world of fighting. In a battle with the enemy, Marquis, the dog who had accompanied them, was killed. Later, while they were making their way back to England by airship, Alexis, who accompanied them, was wounded on the coast of Sweden, where their machine, crippled by the fire of German aviators, had fallen.

While Alexis stood off the foe the lads repaired the damage to the machine, but when they finally succeeded in dragging the huge Cossack aboard and once more headed toward home, they found that their friend was wounded unto death. He died as the aeroplane sped over the North Sea.

In Russia both lads had been decorated with the Cross of St. George by the Czar of Russia himself--this for their bravery and daring.

Hal and Chester were both exponents of the manly art of self-defense, and more than once their skill in the fistic art had stood them to good advantage. They were also proficient in the use of the revolver and sword. They had returned from Russia with a dispatch for Sir John French from the Russian Grand Duke, a message so important that the Russian commander-in-chief would not flash it by wireless for fear that it might be intercepted by the Germans, and the code deciphered.

Hal and Chester went at once to the quarters assigned them, where they immediately threw themselves down to rest. They were tired out, as the journey had occupied days, and they had scarcely closed their eyes during

that time. They had remained in England only long enough to have the body of Alexis buried with fitting honors, and had then set out for France immediately.

It was dark when the two lads were aroused by the sound of a bugle blowing the call to arms. Both were quickly on their feet and dashed through the darkness to where they could make out the form of their commander, surrounded by other members of his staff.

"Something up!" cried Hal as they hurried forward.

"Probably a night attack," said Chester. "General French may be planning to carry some of the enemy's trenches by assault."

"Guess you are right," replied Hal briefly.

They took their places among the others of the British leader's staff and were received with nods of welcome and some expressions of astonishment. They had friends among the British officers, many of whom, because of their long absence, had mourned them as dead.

The lads let their eyes roam about. Troops, troops, troops! Nothing but troops, as far as the eye could see. Cavalry, artillery and infantry in solid masses on every side; officers darting hither and thither delivering sharp orders. It was an impressive sight.

An officer on horseback dashed up to General French and the two held a short conversation. As the rider turned and was about to make off again the lads recognized him.

"Major Derevaux!" shouted Hal, taking a step forward.

The officer wheeled in his saddle. He recognized the two lads in an instant, and reined in.

"Hello, boys," he called back. "I heard you were dead. Glad to see you again."

Without further words, but with a wave of his hand, the French officer put spurs to his horse and dashed out of sight in the darkness.

"Wonder what he is doing here?" said Hal. "He was attached to General Joffre's staff when we left. Remember?"

"Yes," replied Chester. "Must be some momentous move under way."

Other officers now began to appear. They dashed up to the British commander, made their reports and immediately dashed away again.

"Lieutenant Paine! Lieutenant Crawford!"

It was General French summoning them and the boys approached and came to attention. Because of past experience, both lads realized instantly that the General had some ticklish work cut out and that he had selected them to carry it through.

"Take a troop of cavalry," came the command, "and make a reconnoissance of the northeast!"

Quickly two officers nearby sprang from their horses and offered them to the lads, for the latter had not yet had time to find steeds. The lads sprang into the saddle, saluted their commander, and dashed away. To the nearest cavalry force they hurried, where upon repeating General French's order to the commander, they soon had a troop at their disposal.

A troop of cavalry is composed of one hundred men. It is usually commanded by a captain.

Now it is very unusual for a commanding officer to have two lieutenants on his staff, as had General French in the persons of Hal and Chester; but the General had commissioned them as such on the spur of the moment, and when they took command of the troop they consequently, for the time, superseded the captain in command—for they were the personal representatives of the General himself.

The two lads placed themselves at the head of the troop and rode forward at a rapid trot. Past dense masses of infantry, battery after battery of heavy artillery and troop upon troop of cavalry they rode toward the northeast.

They were not yet at the front of the long battle line, for General French had his headquarters well back, but still close enough to be in constant danger from the enemy's artillery fire.

From a trot the troop broke into a gallop, and soon were beyond the farthest trenches. Skirting this at the extreme north—close to the sea—they progressed still further toward the enemy. It was the boys' duty, if possible, to find out the position of the German forces at this point and to determine their numbers; also the strategic positions that could be used by either army.

Now an order was given for the troop to spread out, and, leaving the road, the two lads led their men into the woods, where they could advance with less danger of being seen. They had not been ordered forward to give battle, and there would be no fighting unless it became necessary in order that their mission might be successful.

But, as in most missions upon which the lads had been dispatched, there was to be fighting; and these British were not the men to turn their backs upon the enemy without giving them a warm reception.

From the shelter of the sand dunes there came suddenly a fusillade. Two British troopers reeled in their saddles and tumbled to the ground.

CHAPTER II.

A BIT OF HISTORY.

While Hal and Chester and their troop of British cavalry are preparing to meet this unexpected attack, it will be well to introduce here a few words relating to the positions of the gigantic armies battling in France and Belgium.

The war had now been in progress for five months. From the time that the

Allies had braced and checked the Germans in their rapid advance upon Paris, and had assumed the offensive themselves, they had progressed consistently, if slowly.

The Germans contested every inch of the ground, and all along the great battle line, stretching out for almost four hundred miles, the fighting had been terrific. Day after day, week after week, month after month the terrible struggle had raged incessantly. The losses of all four armies, German, British, French and Belgian, had been enormous, although, up to date, it was admitted that the Germans had suffered the worst.

The conflict raged with advantage first to one side and then to the other. Assaults and counter-assaults were the order of the day. From Ostend, on the North Sea, now in the hands of the Germans, to the southern extremity of Alsace-Lorraine, the mighty hosts were locked in a

death grapple; but, in spite of the fearful execution of the weapons of modern warfare, there had been no really decisive engagement. Neither side had suffered a severe blow.

In the North the Allies were being given powerful aid by a strong British fleet, which hurled its shells upon the Germans infesting that region, thus checking at the same time the threatened advance of the Kaiser's legions upon Nieuport and Dunkirk, which the Germans planned to use as naval bases for air raids on England.

The mighty siege and field guns of the Germans--which had been used with such telling effect upon Liege, Brussels, Antwerp and Ostend, battering the fortifications there to bits in practically no time at all--while immense in their power of destruction, were still not a match for the longer range guns mounted by the British battleships. Consequently, long-range artillery duels in the north had been all in favor of British arms.

Terrific charges of the British troops, of whom there were now less than half a million--Scotch, Irish, Canadians and Indians included--on the continent, had driven the Germans from Dixmude, Ypres and Armentieres, captured earlier in the war. Ostend had been shelled by the British fleet, and a show of force had been made in that vicinity, causing the Germans to believe that the Allies would attempt to reoccupy this important seaport.

Farther south the French also had met with some success. From within striking distance of Paris the invaders had been driven back to the Marne, and from the Marne to the northern and eastern shores of the Aisne.

But here the German line held.

The fighting along the Aisne, continuing without cessation, already had been the bloodiest in the history of wars; and here, the French on one side of the river, and the Germans on the other, the two great armies had proceeded to intrench, making themselves as comfortable as possible, and constructing huts and other substantial shelters against the icy hand of King Winter, who had come to rule over the battlefield.

The French cabinet, which had fled from Paris to Bordeaux when the German army drew close to Paris, had returned to the former capital, and affairs of state were being conducted as before. With several millions of

fighting men at the front, France still had an additional two million to hurl into the thick of the fray at the psychological moment.

Recruiting in England, slow at first, was now beginning to be more satisfactory. Lord Kitchener had in the neighborhood of a million and a half men being trained and prepared for the rigors of war. These, also, would be hurled into the thick of the fight when the time was ripe.

It was plainly evident, however, that the Allies were content to hold their present lines. There was little doubt that it was their plan to let the real fighting be held off till spring, when, by hurling an additional three million men into the field, they believed they could settle German militarism once and for all.

Rumors of other countries joining in the great war grew more rife daily. Portugal already had given assurances that she would throw her army to the support of Great Britain should she be asked to do so. A great diplomatic _coup_--a great victory for British statesmanship--had cleared the way for the entrance of Rumania and Greece into the war on the side of the Allies. This _coup_ had been to gain from Bulgaria assurances that Bulgaria would not go to the support of Germany should Rumania and Greece take up arms.

The Italian populace, also, was clamoring for war. In Rome demonstrations against Germany had become frequent and violent. It appeared to be only a question of time until Italy also would hurl her millions of trained fighting men into the field in support of the Allies.

From Ostend the great battle line extended due south to Noyen, where it branched off to the southeast. South of Noyen French soil had been almost cleared of the Germans. Alsace had in turn been invaded by the French, who had penetrated to within twelve miles of Strasbourg. The French troops also had progressed to within eight miles of Metz, in Lorraine.

The forward move by the southern army of France had been sudden, and the Germans had been forced to give way under the desperation and courage of the French troops.

Once before, in the earlier days of the war, the French had reached Metz and Strasbourg, but had been hurled back by overwhelming numbers of the enemy and forced to retreat well into France. Then the German line in Alsace and Lorraine had been weakened to hurl denser masses of Germans upon the British and Belgians in the north.

The French had not been slow to take advantage of this weakening of the southern army of the Kaiser, and, immediately bringing great pressure to bear, had cleared French territory of the invader in the south.

But the French commander did not stop with this. Alsace and Lorraine, French soil until after the Franco-Prussian war, when it had been awarded to Prussia as the spoils of war, must be recaptured. The French pressed on and the Germans gave way before them.

Meantime, in the Soissons region the French also had been making progress; but the Kaiser, evidently becoming alarmed by the great pressure being exercised by the French in Alsace-Lorraine--in order to relieve the pressure--immediately made a show of strength near Soissons, seeking thereby to cause the French to withdraw troops from

Alsace-Lorraine to reenforce the army of the Soissons to stem the new German advance there.

Taken somewhat unawares by the suddenness of the German assault upon their lines near Soissons, the French were forced to give back. They braced immediately, however, and the succeeding day regained the ground lost in the first German assault.

Then the Germans made another show of strength at Verdun, southeast of Soissons. General Joffre immediately hurled a new force to the support of the French army at that point.

Meanwhile, as the result of the German assaults upon Soissons and Verdun, in an effort to lessen the pressure being brought to bear by the French in Alsace-Lorraine, there had been a lull in the fighting in the latter regions.

Word from the eastern theater of war brought the news that Russia had a new big army advancing upon the Germans in Poland from the east, threatening to outflank the army that had penetrated to within fifty miles of Warsaw, the capital and chief city of Poland. This, it was taken, would mean that Germany would either have to retreat within her own borders into East Prussia, or else that troops would have to be dispatched from the west to reenforce those in the east.

In this event there was little doubt that General French and General Joffre would immediately order another allied advance along the entire front.

News of the utter annihilation of three Turkish army corps in the Caucasus by the Russians also cheered the British, French and Belgian troops, as did news that the Russians had cleared the way for their long-deferred invasion of Hungary, and, ultimately, of Austria.

So far, from the Allies' point of view, the one big disappointment of the war had been the inaction of the British and French fleets. True, several engagements of minor importance had been fought, chief of which was the sinking of a German fleet of five ships by a British squadron in the waters of the Pacific Ocean, off the coast of Argentina.

But the fact that the German fleet, although blockaded, after five months of the war had not been destroyed, was causing considerable adverse criticism in England and France. Several German sea raids--by cruisers and submarines which had successfully run the blockade--had caused condemnation of Great Britain's naval policy.

In spite of the fact that only in one instance had such a raid resulted in any serious damage, the British Admiralty had been roundly censured. Germany's policy of "whittling down" the British fleet, so that the Germans could give battle on even terms, while by no means successful thus far, had nevertheless considerably reduced the size of the English navy. Some of her first-class cruisers, and one formidable dreadnought had been sunk.

The French fleet in the Adriatic and in the Mediterranean had been equally as inactive, although a squadron of British and French ships even now was attempting to destroy the Turkish fortifications along the Dardanelles, that a passage of the straits might be forced. So far this, too, had been unsuccessful.

The fighting in France and Belgium, Alsace and Lorraine had now become a series of battles for the possession of the various trenches that had been dug. True, long-range artillery duels raged almost incessantly, but the mass of both armies lay in the trenches, now attacking and capturing the enemy's trenches, now being attacked and being driven out again.

Besides the artillery duels there were, of course, occasional skirmishes between the cavalry, some growing to the proportions of real battles. But the results of these had never been decisive. The mighty armies were gripped in a deadlock, and indications pointed to this deadlock being maintained until spring, when, with the disappearance of fierce snowstorms and the breaking up of the terrific cold, a decisive battle might be fought.

This was the situation up to date, when Hal and Chester, with the troop of cavalry, set out on a reconnaissance of the enemy's position on the first day of January, 1915.

CHAPTER III.

A SKIRMISH.

Surprised at the sudden fusillade, Hal and Chester drew taut the reins with their left hands, pulling their horses back on their haunches, while with their right hands they drew their revolvers. Behind them the troop came to an abrupt stop.

From the protection of the sand dunes then came a second volley, more deadly than the first, and four more British cavalymen hit the ground.

Hal and Chester were inactive no longer.

"Forward!" cried Hal, and, setting spurs to his horse, he dashed forward, closely followed by Chester and his men.

As the British charged, the small body of Germans--only slightly larger than the British force--broke from their places of concealment and fled. The British rode rapidly after them with loud cries.

Before the enemy could scatter sufficiently to make good their escape, the British horsemen were upon them. Some turned to fight, and were shot down with revolver bullets, while others, who ran, were cut down by the heavy cavalry swords of the English.

To the right a score of Germans, in a body, turned to fight it out. Toward these dashed Hal and Chester, followed by twenty men. Hal, as he rode, emptied his automatic at this little body of the enemy and Chester did likewise. Then, their weapons empty, they were upon them with drawn swords.

A German revolver bullet struck Hal's horse and the animal fell; but by a quick leap Hal avoided being pinned under it, and hurled himself upon the enemy afoot. Quickly Chester checked his horse and springing to the ground dashed to his chum's side. The men behind them also dismounted and

prepared to give battle afoot.

The two lads hurled themselves at the enemy without stopping to think. Hal's sword struck up the weapon of a German officer, and before the latter could recover his poise, the lad had run him through. Chester disposed of a second officer equally as rapidly.

From pursuit of the others, the rest of the troop had now returned and completely surrounded the little band of Germans. Hal lowered his sword, and, stepping back a pace, called upon the enemy to surrender.

"Never!" came the reply, followed by the German battle-cry: "_Deutschland ueber alles_!"

A revolver bullet tore a ragged hole through Hal's cap, and a second one passed just under his left arm.

But now the revolvers of the Germans were all empty, and the fighting continued with swords alone.

Into the very midst of the German squad the two lads hurled themselves. Cutting, slashing, parrying and thrusting, the Germans fought on doggedly. Now a man fell, then another, and still another, but still they would not yield until at last there were left but three. From these, at Hal's command, the British drew back to give them one more chance for life; but they would not take it, and the British closed in again.

"Well," said Chester, a few moments later, "it's all over."

"But they fought well and bravely," said Hal, returning his sword to its scabbard.

He looked around and took an account of his losses. Twelve British soldiers lay dead upon the ground, and a score of others were nursing their wounds--some serious, some only scratches. But there was no time to dress these wounds now. There was other work to do.

"Mount!" cried Hal.

The troop obeyed, and Hal sprang into the saddle of a riderless horse.

His sword flashed forth once more.

"Forward!" he cried.

The little troop set off at a gallop.

To the north could be caught occasional glimpses of the North Sea, as the sand dunes now and then permitted an unobstructed view. The party was at the extreme north of the long battle line that stretched away to the south, clear through Belgium and France.

For perhaps half an hour the troop rode rapidly on, but finally Hal called a halt. He listened attentively. There was no sound to break the stillness, other than the faint boom of heavy guns in the distance, telling that the long-range artillery duel, farther south, was still in progress.

But, as Hal was about to give the word for a further advance, from almost

directly ahead, though still some distance away, came the sound of a single pistol shot. Just one shot; that was all. In vain did the lads strain their ears to catch a possible reply to the shot. None came.

Hal ordered his men to advance at a slow trot, and the troop moved forward once more.

Now they came to a woods. They advanced rapidly and the woods became less dense, and the darkness caused by the heavy overhanging trees gave way to more light. Hal again called a halt, and himself rode forward to investigate. Twenty yards ahead he came to a clearing in the woods, stretching out for a possible quarter of a mile.

In the very center of this clearing the lad made out a strange sight. His eyes fell upon a detachment of German troops--about fifty all told--dancing about what Hal finally made out to be a barn.

As Hal looked a sheet of flame sprang up. It was plain to the lad in an instant that the enemy had set the wooden structure afire.

"But why?" he muttered to himself.

The answer was not long coming.

From the barn, through a crack between the boards, issued a cloud of smoke, and even above the yells of the dancing Germans Hal made out the report of a revolver. One of the Germans stopped his antics and toppled to the ground to rise no more.

"Great Scott!" cried Hal aloud. "They are burning him up!"

Jerking his horse about, he dashed back to his men and again placed himself at their head. Chester ranged himself alongside.

In a few brief words Hal explained what he had seen, and then cried to his men:

"Forward! Charge!"

At a gallop the British covered the distance to the clearing, and then dashed toward the enemy as fast as their horses could go. As the sound of galloping hoofs was borne to the ears of the enemy, they stopped their dancing about the barn and fell into line to beat back the British.

The first line threw themselves to the ground. The second line fell to their knees, their rifles pointing over their prostrate comrades, while above them protruded the weapons of the third line, standing erect.

At a shouted word of command from Hal the British cavalry scattered, and bore down on the enemy from three directions. Here and there a rider dropped to the ground as a German bullet found its mark; but in spite of these losses and the withering German fire, the rest dashed on.

Right up to the muzzles of the German rifles the British charged, and leaning over their horses did terrible havoc among the enemy with downward sweeps of their heavy swords. They rode their horses right in among them, the hoofs of the chargers trampling the foe to death. Some sprang to their feet and darted toward the rear, only to encounter the British troopers who had ridden around behind them.

The engagement was short and decisive. Soon the majority of the Germans lay dead upon the ground, and at a cry of "Surrender!" from Chester, the rest now threw down their arms.

But the British had not escaped without great loss. Exposed to the fire of the enemy as they had charged upon the solid triple line of rifles, many had fallen. Less than half the original troop now remained, and of these at least half were wounded, though none seriously.

During the fight the flames that had enveloped the barn had gained great headway and were now raging fiercely. Hal looked quickly about for some sign of the man whom he knew had been within. He believed that the man must have come forth, when he was aware that assistance was at hand, for he realized that to remain in the burning structure would have probably meant death.

But in the troop he saw no sign of a stranger; nor had Chester nor any of the men seen anyone leave the barn.

"Great Scott! He'll burn to death in there!" Hal cried.

"Well, why didn't the big chump come out?" said Chester.

"Maybe he was hit by a bullet and killed," said Hal.

"Yes; or perhaps he is wounded, and unable to drag himself out," said Chester.

"By Jove!" said Hal. "I never thought of that!"

Quickly he unstrapped his sword belt and drew off his coat.

"What are you going to do?" cried Chester in alarm.

"I'm going in after him," replied Hal grimly.

"But you'll be killed!" expostulated Chester. "You couldn't live in that seething mass of flame!"

"Nevertheless, I am going to try and bring him out," said Hal quietly.

He drew his handkerchief from his pocket, and quickly wetting it from his canteen, tied it over his mouth and nose. Then, brushing aside the protests of Chester and the men, he plunged through the door of the burning building.

Inside he could dimly make out his surroundings. Quickly he scanned the floor for a sight of the occupant, but saw no sign of him. Then, at one side of the barn he made out a ladder, leading to a loft. He ran to it quickly, and as quickly mounted it to the floor above. Once more he turned his eyes upon the floor and peered about.

The heat was intense, and the lad now got his breath with difficulty, so dense was the smoke. He likewise realized that the floor, already blazing, must give way in a few moments, in which event he would be buried in the fiery ruins.

Glancing quickly about he saw there was no window nor opening from which

he could jump. He must go out by the way he had come in.

Suddenly his eye lighted upon an object on the floor at the far end of the barn. Quickly he ran toward it and stooped over. The object was a figure of a man, lying upon his face, apparently unconscious. The lad wasted no time in thought. Exerting his utmost strength, he succeeded in hoisting the limp body across his shoulder.

Carrying his human burden he staggered to the ladder and began his descent. It was slow work, for the lad was near exhaustion. He realized that a slip would probably mean death, and in spite of the fact that he realized the necessity for haste, descended slowly.

At last his feet touched the bottom, and turning toward the open door he staggered on.

As he reached the open door the barn behind him collapsed with a terrible crash; but before he lapsed into unconsciousness he saw the face of the man he carried.

"Anderson!" he cried, and tumbled over in a dead faint.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN HARRY ANDERSON.

When Hal returned to consciousness he lay upon the hard ground and Chester was bending over him. Shifting his position slightly the lad saw what was left of his troop standing idly about. At the same moment he felt a hand grasp his and heard a well-known voice exclaim:

"I owe my life to you, Hal. It seems that you bob up wherever you are needed most."

Hal turned and gazed at the speaker. He was Captain Harry Anderson, of His British Majesty's Royal Dragoons, whom the lad had last seen in the hands of the Germans. Then the fight, the burning barn, and his recognition of Anderson just before he had lost consciousness, all came back to him in a flash, and he pressed the hand that grasped his.

"Lieutenant--I mean Captain Anderson!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were safe in the hands of the Germans."

The lad arose slowly to his feet, supported by the captain's arm. He staggered a trifle; but, after inhaling a few breaths of the cold, invigorating air, was soon himself again.

"And I," said Captain Anderson, answering Hal's exclamation, "thought you also were safe in the hands of the Germans."

"Well," said Hal, with a faint smile, "it seems that the enemy did wrong to believe they had any of us safely."

"It does, indeed," the captain smiled back; "but come, tell me how you escaped. I have asked Chester, but he has been so worried about you that

he has failed to do so."

"We haven't time now," replied Hal. "We are on a reconnaissance, and must proceed immediately."

"It will be unnecessary," replied Anderson dryly. "I have just come from that way and am in a position to tell you, or General French, either, for that matter, all you desire to know."

"Are you sure?" asked Hal.

"Positive," replied the captain briefly.

"In that event," said Hal, "we may as well return, for we shall be wasting time and possibly sacrificing men, to linger here longer."

He turned to his men. "Mount!" he ordered.

The troop sprang to the saddle. Ordering them to face about, the lad commanded:

"Forward!"

The troop set off at a quick trot, Captain Anderson on a spare horse riding between Hal and Chester at their head.

"Now," said the captain, "you can tell me about yourselves as we ride along."

The two lads did so, and when he learned that the lads had seen active service in the eastern theater of war, the captain was greatly surprised.

"And still I shouldn't be surprised at anything you do or may do," he said. "You see I know you well."

"Come now, captain," said Chester, "tell us something of your own experiences."

"Well," said Anderson, "I have had about as strenuous a time as you can imagine, and I have been at the threshold of death more than once."

"Let's hear about it!" exclaimed Hal.

"You remember, of course," began the captain, "how we were captured, and how badly I was wounded? You remember, also, that we were separated in the German camp?"

The lads signified that they did, and the captain continued:

"All right, then. It seems that my wounds were more serious than was at first supposed. A fever set in, and my German physician told me that I was a dead man. I laughed at him. I told him I had too much work to do to die yet awhile. He wanted to know what that work was and I told him it was killing Germans. This made him angry, and--"

"I don't wonder," said Hal dryly.

"It's a wonder he didn't administer a dose of poison right then," said Chester.

"Yes," continued the captain, "it made him mad, and he informed me that I might as well die, because if I didn't I would be shot anyhow."

"Shot!" ejaculated Chester. "What for?"

"That's what I asked him. He replied that I had been declared a spy, and that I was to be put to death as soon as I was well enough to face a firing squad. He said they didn't want to do it while I was so ill."

"Very considerate of them," commented Hal.

"Just what I told the surgeon. Well, naturally, with this sentence hanging over my head I didn't get well any quicker than I had to. Every day I could feel myself getting better, but I pretended to get worse. I contracted all the ailments you ever heard of, and I was a sore puzzle to the surgeon. He had several others look me over, but they couldn't agree on what was the matter with me, although they did agree I was a very sick man and had only a few days to linger on this earth. Yet all this time, mind you, I was shamming and getting better every day."

"You must be a pretty good actor," said Chester.

"Well, I'm not so bad," replied Captain Anderson modestly. "But to continue. I finally became afflicted with St. Vitus' dance, and later with a queer ailment that wouldn't allow me to keep still. I'd hop out of bed and wander about, with the surgeons or nurses on my heels, and then I'd fall down in a fit. This continued for several days, and finally they became tired of following me about, figuring, I suppose, that a man in my condition couldn't go very far, anyhow."

"This was what I had been waiting for, but I didn't put the plan I had decided upon into execution at once. I waited for a good chance. At last, it came. The surgeon was a young chap and smooth shaven, which was lucky for me. Also he was about my build, and there was some slight resemblance between us. This day he was with me alone. Not a soul was present save us two. As he turned his back to look into his medicine case, I struck him heavily in the back of the neck.

"He toppled over without a sound. Quickly I exchanged clothes with him and put his body in my bed, after which I picked up his case and walked boldly out of the hospital."

"Great Scott!" cried Chester. "You had plenty of nerve!"

"Well," continued the captain, "no one interfered with me and I walked about at will. I kept edging closer and closer to the firing line, figuring that I would make a break for liberty at the first opportunity. It came sooner than I expected.

"There had been a big battle, and all surgeons and nurses were rushed to the front to look after the wounded. I went along. The battle was over, and we immediately went forth to attend to the wounded. Again I went along, only this time I didn't stop going. When I figured I was far enough ahead I broke into a run.

"But I wasn't to get away so easily. A surgeon who had been near me saw me take to my heels, and instead of attending to the wounded as he should have done, he raised an alarm. Immediately a troop of horsemen dashed

after me. I managed to reach a little woods directly ahead of me in safety and climbed up a tree. The Germans were unable to find me, so when night came I descended from my perch and continued my journey.

"Soon after daylight I came upon a house, where I asked for food. I still wore the German surgeon's uniform, and here this worked to my disadvantage."

"How was that?" asked Chester.

"It seems that the family were Belgians, and I hadn't thought of that. They gave me food and drink all right, but they spilled a little drug of some kind in the drink. The next thing I knew I was bound and gagged and was looking down the muzzle of a revolver held by a ferocious-looking Belgian peasant. He informed me my time had come. I told him I was English, and explained my capture and escape. He listened patiently, but when I finished he informed me that he wasn't going to take any chances. I had just five minutes to live, he said."

"Great Scott!" cried Hal. "That was pretty close. How did you escape?"

"More by good luck than anything else," was the reply. "There was some kind of a noise behind the peasant and he turned to investigate. At that moment I kicked out with my foot and the toe of my boot caught him squarely under the chin. He went down with a thump. I don't know whether I killed him or not."

"But how did you free your hands?" asked Hal.

"Well, I had quite a little trouble, but I managed to drag my chair over to the fire, and held my hands over the blaze until the cord was burned."

"And didn't you burn your hands?"

"A little," was the quiet response; "but it had to be done. Then I untied my legs and removed the gag, after which I took to my heels as fast as I could. I didn't care for any more Belgian hospitality to one who wore a German uniform."

"In the road I came upon a dead British soldier. I took his uniform and discarded that of the German surgeon. I now began to feel that I was reasonably safe, and I lay down at night and slept like a log, in spite of the cold."

"I was awakened a little before daylight by the sounds of approaching footsteps. I saw the marchers before they saw me, but still not quite quick enough. They were the same men from whose hands you rescued me only a short while ago."

"I had been confined in that hospital so long that I was still somewhat weak and I couldn't run fast enough to get away from them. I tried, but it was no use. Then I took a couple of shots at them, and got two or three, I think. I'm not sure, though. Anyhow, I saw this barn ahead, and dashed into it, figuring that I might possibly hold them off."

"When they set fire to the barn, and I realized I couldn't get out, I gave up. I did shoot one through a crack, but a moment later a shot came through and caught me in the side. That's the last I remember until I returned to consciousness and learned that you had saved me."

"Well," said Chester, "you certainly have had an eventful time."

"There is no question about that," Hal agreed. "But how do you feel now, captain?"

"Tip top. And you?"

"First rate."

The troop continued at a trot, and Hal now believed that they were out of danger--that there was no likelihood of encountering a force of the enemy--and turned to his friends, remarking:

"Well, we might as well--Hello!"

He broke off suddenly and checked the pace of his horse.

"What's up?" demanded Chester, doing likewise.

For answer Hal pointed down the road. A man was approaching them at a dead run.

CHAPTER V.

ANTHONY STUBBS, WAR CORRESPONDENT.

"Now, what in the name of all that's wonderful do you suppose is the matter with him?" ejaculated Chester.

Hal shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"You've got me," he admitted; "but by the look of him he's not running for fun."

"Right," agreed Captain Anderson; "but whatever is on his trail will have to travel pretty lively to catch him. Look at him come!"

As the stranger dashed toward them, head hanging and arms working like pistons, the three friends suddenly broke into a loud laugh. A more comical-looking specimen of humanity would be hard to imagine. The friends looked him over carefully as he came on.

Large he was, there could be no mistake about that, but he seemed to be about as wide as he was long. Hal and Chester took in his dimensions with an appraising eye. Stout and chubby, he must have weighed all of 200 pounds, and his height, the lads saw, could not be more than five feet four.

As he tore down the road as fast as his peculiar build would permit, he did not once raise his head, and therefore did not perceive the British troops in his path. The lads could see that his face was red, and that he was puffing and snorting from lack of breath. Not perceiving the men who barred his path, he would have dashed right in among them had not Hal brought him to a sudden stop with a word of command.

"Halt!" he cried.

With a gasp of amazement the man halted and gazed at the British as though bewildered. One look he gave them and then exclaimed in a shrill piping voice, in English:

"You are surrounded! Run, Anthony, run!"

He suited the action to the word, and, turning in his tracks, ran, puffing and blowing, in the direction from which he had come.

In spite of his merriment at this comical sight, Hal put spurs to his horse and dashed after him. The others did likewise. Hearing the sounds of pursuit, the little stout man redoubled his efforts and puffed on like an engine.

Hal ranged his horse alongside of him, and, restraining his laughter, shouted in a stern tone:

"Halt! or you are a dead man!"

The little man needed no further warning. He stopped so quickly that Hal rode on beyond him, while those behind were able to check their horses barely in time to keep from riding over him.

Hal leaped to the ground, and stood over the stranger, who lay panting on the earth where he had fallen the moment he stopped running.

"Who are you?" demanded Hal. "What are you doing here?"

The little man struggled in vain to reply; but he gasped so wildly for breath that for a moment he was unable to utter a word. Then, as he still panted, his eye fell upon the uniforms of the British troopers. He was on his feet in a moment.

"I thought you were Germans!" he exclaimed. "Great Caesar's ghost! I didn't think I could run another step, but I did; and here I was running from you fellows. What do you mean by chasing an American citizen down the road?"

He paused and glared at Hal wrathfully. The latter could control his merriment no longer, and burst into a hearty laugh. The others did likewise.

The little man drew himself up indignantly.

"I say!" he exclaimed, "what are you fellows laughing at me for?"

Hal ceased laughing, and his face took on a stern expression.

"Who are you?" he asked briefly. "A spy, eh?"

"A spy! Me a spy?" exclaimed the man. "Great Caesar's ghost, no; I'm no spy."

"Who are you, then?" demanded Hal.

The stranger drew himself up to his full height--and he was still almost

as broad as he was long, folded his arms and said proudly:

"I am Anthony Stubbs, sir, war correspondent of the _New York Gazette_, sir; and I am here in search of news."

"News, eh?" said Hal. "It is my belief that you are in search of information to turn over to the Germans."

"You are mistaken, sir," replied Anthony, somewhat uncomfortably, the lads could see. "I assure you on the honor of a Stubbs that I am what I represent myself to be."

Hal could keep a straight face no longer. So comical was the little man in his ruffled dignity that the boy was forced to laugh.

"All right, Mr. Stubbs," he said at last, "I believe you; but tell me, what were you running from when you bumped into us?"

"I wasn't running, sir," was the reply. "I heard a large force of the enemy in a field just out of the woods, and I was merely hurrying to a place where I could get a look at them."

"Well, you were hurrying at a pretty good gait," said Hal. "But tell me, is the enemy in force?"

"I didn't see any of them," said Stubbs, "but by the sounds of their horses' hoofs, I should say they were in force, sir."

"Where?" demanded Hal, somewhat anxiously.

"Straight ahead, sir," replied Stubbs, pointing down the road.

"We thank you, Mr. Stubbs," said Hal, "and we shall now leave you to gather your news while we proceed to reconnoiter."

"And leave me here?" cried Stubbs.

"Why, certainly. You are paid to get the news for your paper, are you not?"

"But I'm not paid to be shot by the Germans," replied Stubbs vehemently. "Take me with you."

How much truth there was in Stubbs' account of a large force of the enemy approaching, Hal, of course, did not know. But the little man appeared so greatly worried that Hal was moved to motion him to one of the spare horses, which had followed the troop.

Stubbs clambered into the saddle with difficulty, and, once astride the animal, he maneuvered so as to get right in among the British cavalrymen, who smiled tolerantly as they surrounded him. Then, at a word from Hal, the troop moved forward at a slow trot.

They rode for perhaps fifteen minutes, and so far Hal had seen no signs of an enemy, nor was there any evidence that a large force had passed that way recently. He turned to Stubbs.

"I see no sign of the enemy," he said. "Where were they?"

Stubbs motioned to the left.

"Beyond the woods, there, in an open field," he replied. "I didn't see them, but I heard 'em, all right. They are probably lying in ambush, and we shall all be killed."

Hal halted his men, and, dismounting, plunged into the woods to investigate. At the edge of the woods he came upon a field, and there he saw the "enemy" or at least what had caused Stubbs' fright. He broke into a loud laugh, and hurried back.

"I have found the enemy," he said quietly. "Come, men, I shall show them to you."

All dismounted, and Hal led the way, Stubbs following protestingly. At the edge of the woods Hal stopped, and, taking Stubbs by the arm, led him forward.

"There," he said, pointing, "is the enemy; and I don't believe they chased you very far."

Stubbs looked and gasped, then mumbled:

"I wonder, I wonder--"

For the objects upon which his eyes rested, the movements of which had sent him scurrying down the road in fear for his life, were nothing more than a drove of about a dozen sheep, which, thrashing about in the field, had led Stubbs to suspect the presence of the Germans.

Stubbs, after the one look, turned and strode majestically to where the horses had been left. The laughter of the troopers rankled in his ears and his face was a dull red. He was mounted when Hal, Chester and the others returned.

"Stubbs," said Hal, as they rode forward again, "you could have whipped all those fellows yourself."

"Well," replied Stubbs, "they might have been Germans."

He lapsed into silence.

Night was fast falling when the British came in sight of a little house, and Hal decided that they would stop there and commandeer something to eat. Accordingly they rode up to the door, where Hal, before dismounting, hailed those within with a shout.

A woman appeared in the door, and learning what the British required, invited them to dismount and enter. This they did, and soon sat down to a substantial repast, Stubbs with them. The war correspondent now became talkative, and entertained with an account of his adventures.

Upon learning that Hal and Chester were American lads, the little man's pleasure knew no bounds.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed. "I knew it the minute I set eyes on you."

"Perhaps that is why you were in such a hurry to get back down the road," said Chester.

"No, no," was the reply. "I knew you were Americans, but I feared, for the moment, that you might be fighting with the Germans."

"Well," said Chester shortly, "I don't imagine you will find many Americans in the German ranks."

"I want to tell you boys," said Stubbs, "that I appreciate your saving me from falling into the hands of the enemy, where I might have been kept a prisoner for years."

"We didn't save you from anything," said Hal.

"I know, I know," said Stubbs, "but you might have done so. I want to tell you that I appreciate it and that Anthony Stubbs is your friend for life; and the friendship of such a man is not to be laughed at."

The little man's face was so serious that the lads even forbore to smile.

"We thank you for your friendship," said Hal quietly, "and I assure you that it will not be laughed at. Friendships are not to be treated lightly."

"I knew you would see it that way," was the response. "If at any time I can be of service to you, command me."

He arose and made them the bow of a cavalier.

The meal finished, Hal pushed back his chair and arose.

"We might as well be on our way," he said. "Come."

They left the room and made their way to the place where they had tied their horses. Hal started back with a cry of surprise.

The horses were not there, but upon the ground, a bullet wound in his forehead, lay the man whom Hal had left to guard them.

CHAPTER VI.

FOUR-FOOTED ENEMIES.

Hal bent over the dead British soldier; then, arising, turned to Chester.

"He was shot from ambush," he said quietly. "He didn't even have time to draw his revolver. See, it is still in its holster."

"And, if we don't get away from here immediately, we are likely to be shot, too," replied Chester.

"Chester is right," agreed Captain Anderson. "Come, Hal, we had better be moving."

Hal nodded, and gave a brief word of command. Immediately the little troop of cavalymen, afoot now, moved slowly down the road in the

darkness. They went forward briskly and the hand of every man rested on his weapon, for the mysterious death of their companion had been a warning they could not but heed. There was no telling what foes might lurk in the blackness of the bushes that lined either side of the highway.

Anthony Stubbs, war correspondent, had been unable to force himself into the center of the British troops, and was now bringing up the rear. Now and then he tried to insert himself between the men in front of him, but all such attempts had proved futile. The British did not intend to lose their formation in order to allow him to reach a place of comparative safety.

As Stubbs stumbled along in the darkness, he cast furtive glances over his shoulder and peered intently into the bushes, first on one side and then on the other; and as he plodded on he mumbled continually to himself.

Came a sudden shrill cry from the left--a wild screech that, for the moment, the lads were unable to identify.

Hal immediately called a halt and all stopped to listen. It came again, a shrill, piercing cry; and with it Anthony Stubbs hurled himself violently upon the men ahead of him and dashed through the center of the troop. Beside the two lads he stopped, panting. He felt more secure there.

"What was that?" he cried in a shrill voice.

The lads did not reply, but still stood listening. A third time the cry rang out from the woods. Then Chester laughed aloud.

"It's a cat!" he exclaimed.

"A cat!" echoed Stubbs.

"Yes, cats are plentiful in the war zone. Necessity has taken the edge off their skin-deep docility, and many of them resemble hyenas more than the domestic pets they used to be."

"Then there is nothing to fear," said Stubbs, drawing a breath of relief.

"No," replied Chester, "there is nothing to fear so long as we are many, but two or three of them would not hesitate to attack a single man. In fact, they have done so before now."

"What! pet cats attack a man?" exclaimed Stubbs.

"Yes, and from what I have heard, they are pretty tough customers. I heard that one man, in an encounter with four of the animals, had one of his eyes scratched out and was otherwise badly clawed before he could shoot them. Half starved, they are perfectly wild."

Stubbs shuddered.

"Let's get away from here, then," he exclaimed.

At a command from Hal, the troop moved off again and Stubbs stuck closely between the two lads.

They had progressed perhaps half a mile further when Stubbs felt his hat suddenly lifted from his head, and at the same moment the sharp crack of a rifle shattered the stillness of the night.

With a shout of terror the war correspondent threw himself to the ground and, like an ostrich, seemed to try to bury his head in the hard road.

Hal turned quickly and, taking quick aim with his revolver, fired into the bushes, a little below the spot where the rifle had flashed fire. A scream of pain rewarded this shot.

Without waiting to ascertain whether there was more than one of the enemy, Hal shouted a command, and the British cavalrymen poured a volley into the woods, aiming low and scattering their fire. Loud guttural exclamations and shouts were the answer to the fusillade.

Immediately Hal shouted:

"To the ground, men! Down quick!"

He suited the action to the word, as did Chester, Captain Anderson and all of the troop. They did not fall a moment too soon, for there now came from the bushes a scattering and withering volley that would have done terrible execution among the little troop of British, but for the fact that they were beneath the line of fire.

"Up and into the bushes!" cried Hal.

A moment and the British were screened from the fire of the enemy on the opposite side of the road, while from their shelter they poured a fire in the direction of rifle flashes across the highway.

Peering from behind the small tree where he had taken shelter, Chester saw a prostrate form in the middle of the road. He thought he recognized it but was not sure. He turned and called to Hal:

"Is Stubbs with you?"

"No," was the reply. "Where is he?"

"I'll have him in a minute," was Chester's brief response.

Throwing himself to the ground, he crawled from behind his shelter and wormed his way along the ground toward the prostrate form in the road, the figure of Stubbs.

The war correspondent lay as though dead, making no move. The lad, keeping as close to the ground as possible, so as to avoid the German bullets flying overhead, drew closer; and, while the lad did not know it, three other forms also were approaching closely in spite of the hail of lead.

But these latter were making their way through the tree-tops, jumping lightly from bough to bough. Silent as shadows they were, but their eyes glared a fiery red and their tails switched angrily.

They were cats.

Half-starved as they were, they had trailed the troop. They had been in

the war zone long enough for their feline intelligence to tell them that where men rode there was likely to be food. More than one dead man, left dead upon the field, had fallen a victim to their claws and teeth.

So now, as Chester crept toward the inert form of the war correspondent, the cats, not perceiving this new enemy--so intent were they upon the body of Stubbs--also approached quietly. Two of the animals were now directly above the body of Stubbs, and stood switching their tails on the limb of a large tree that overhung the roadway. The third was close behind.

Snarling, with bared claws and outstretched legs, the first cat leaped. In a moment the others followed.

Stubbs had been lying upon his face, and all three of the hungry animals lighted squarely upon his back. Instantly the war correspondent lost all resemblance to a dead man, and the man and cats became a panting, struggling, rolling heap.

As Stubbs cried out in alarm, Chester--still some distance away--raised his head and quickly realized the struggle that was taking place. Throwing caution to the winds, he sprang to his feet and with a shout charged the feline foes.

The war correspondent was fighting off his biting, clawing assailants as best he could; but the very fact that the cats clung to his back was a point in their favor. One buried its sharp teeth in the back of Stubbs's neck and the war correspondent raised a howl of anguish.

As if by magic now the firing from the Germans' side of the road ceased. Hal was unaware of the reason for this, but, suspecting a ruse, he ordered his men to cease firing also until he could determine the cause of the enemy's unexpected silence.

On the German side of the road dark faces peered from between the trees and hoarse guttural exclamations issued from these faces as they watched Stubbs struggle with the cats. While the Germans would not go to Stubbs' assistance, nevertheless they would not shoot him down as he struggled with his four-footed enemies.

The British also advanced to their side of the road and watched the struggle.

Thus, by mutual consent, a truce had been declared.

It was at this moment that Chester came to Stubbs' rescue; but before he could take a hand in the fray the figure of a large German, with leveled revolver, accosted the lad.

"Back," he exclaimed in a deep voice. "Let the little man fight it out. This is rare sport. We will declare a truce until the struggle is over. Do you agree?"

Chester considered quickly. He knew that the German officer would be as good as his word, and he knew also that Stubbs, if given time, would dispose of his three enemies.

"I agree," he said, and made his way back to Hal, where he told him of the strange request and his answer.

As the little war correspondent still struggled with his feline assailants the Germans, from their side of the woods, gradually came out from among the trees to get a closer view of the struggle. Unconsciously also the British left their shelter and crowded about to get a better view.

With his right hand Stubbs succeeded in grasping the cat that had bitten him by the back of the neck, and in spite of the animal's frantic clawing and scratching he raised it in the air and brought its head against the ground violently. The cat lay still.

But while Stubbs was thus engaged with one of the enemy, the other two were busy. Stubbs had now jumped to his feet, and one of the animals had succeeded in crawling to his shoulder, where it was making desperate efforts to reach the war correspondent's eyes with its claws. Stubbs protected his eyes with one upraised arm, and groped blindly for the cat.

At last he grasped it securely by the neck and raised it aloft; the other now was biting so fiercely at the back of his neck that he did not take time to dash the first one to the ground, but still holding it aloft with his left hand sought to pluck the other away with his right.

He was unsuccessful in this, for he could not obtain a good hold on the last cat. With a cry of rage he suddenly dashed the cat he held aloft to the ground, and then threw himself to the ground backward, pinioning the cat beneath him.

The cat screamed angrily, and succeeded in squirming from beneath Stubbs; but instead of running away it launched itself directly at Stubbs' face. Stubbs threw up his arm just in time and caught the animal by the neck. Then he walked over to a tree, the Germans allowing him to pass, and dashed the animal's head against the trunk.

The fight was over. The truce was ended.

Quickly the British and German soldiers returned to their shelter on opposite sides of the road. Five minutes passed. Then a British soldier who had exposed himself tumbled over, struck by a stray German bullet.

The battle in the dark was on again.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIGHT IN THE WOODS.

Chester had drawn Stubbs to shelter behind a large tree, and now, bending over the little war correspondent, sought to stop the flow of blood from his wounds. Stubbs was not seriously injured, although he had been badly scratched and bitten in the back of the neck.

"You are a fine bunch, you are!" exploded Stubbs when Chester announced that he had dressed the wounds as well as he could. "Wanted to see those cats chew me up, didn't you?"

"You are a brave man, Mr. Stubbs," replied Chester. "You have accomplished a feat you may well be proud of the rest of your life. It isn't every man who has the chance of distinguishing himself by slaying three wild cats single handed."

"Were they wild cats?" asked Stubbs in surprise.

"Well, they were cats and they certainly were wild," replied Chester.

"Yes, sir, you are a brave man."

"I know that," said Stubbs, "but just the same you fellows should have pitched in and helped me out."

"Had we not been struck motionless by your great display of courage, we might have done so," replied Chester, smiling to himself. "But surely you would not have had us rob you of the glory?"

"Well, no, I wouldn't have wished that," answered Stubbs. "But just the same when a man is attacked by a bunch of wild cats, the first thing he thinks of is help."

"But tell me, Mr. Stubbs," said Chester, "what were you doing in the road in the first place?"

"Why," muttered the little man, somewhat confused, "I was seeking to make out the number of the enemy so that I might tell you whether we were strong enough to defeat them."

"That's all right; I just wanted to know."

Mr. Stubbs peered out from behind the tree, and as he did so a German bullet went whizzing by. Mr. Stubbs hurriedly threw himself upon the ground.

"What's the matter?" demanded Chester, although he knew well enough.

"A slight illness," replied Mr. Stubbs. "I am somewhat faint. I fear I overexerted myself in my struggle with the wild cats."

He lay there behind the tree, stretched out at full length. Nor could he be induced to get to his feet.

Slowly the last half of a moon arose, giving a little light but making the shadows deeper.

Bullets whistled through the trees at regular intervals now, and wherever a man exposed himself the German sharpshooters ran him quickly back to cover or shot him down.

But the British, excellent marksmen that they were, in spite of their losses were having the better of the encounter. Wherever a German arm or leg was exposed, there a British bullet struck. Consequently the firing soon became desultory and then ceased altogether.

Taking advantage of this lull, Chester made a dash, and succeeded in reaching a tree behind which Hal and Captain Anderson had taken shelter.

"What are we going to do?" he demanded. "Surely we can't stay here much longer."

"Well, what shall we do?" demanded Hal. "At the first break the Germans will shoot us down."

"We must do something," replied Chester. "Wait a moment"--as Hal turned away--"I have an idea."

"What is it?" demanded Hal.

"Yes, let's have it," said Captain Anderson.

"Well, why can't a few of us--say ten men--crawl toward the rear, and, when out of sight, make a detour and catch the Germans from the rear? Those who are left here will fire only at intervals, so that when we open from the rear the enemy will believe that the major part of our men are there. Naturally they will present their strongest front there. Then you can take them by surprise from this side."

"By Jove!" ejaculated Captain Anderson. "That's not a half-bad idea."

"It's a good idea," said Hal. "It shall be acted upon at once. Now, who shall go and who shall stay here?"

"Well," said Chester, "as it was I who suggested the plan, I guess I am the one to head those who go. Detail ten men, Hal, and I'll start at once."

The men placed at his disposal Chester made ready to go; but, before he left, he called to Hal:

"By the way, when you leave here don't forget Stubbs. He's lying behind a tree over there," pointing.

"I'll get him," Hal called back, "if I have to carry him on my shoulder."

Dropping to all fours Chester and his ten men soon disappeared in the distance.

Feeling sure that he was out of sight in the thick underbrush, Chester jumped to his feet. The ten men did likewise, and turning to the left all dashed off through the brambles as fast and as quietly as possible. Among the bushes it was very dark, and for this reason the little party was unable to make much speed; but, nevertheless, they pushed on as rapidly as possible.

Finally, feeling that he had gone far enough, Chester turned once more sharply to the left, and pushed on in the way he had come.

At length they came again to the road, and, making sure that there was no German in sight, Chester silently led his men across the highway to the German side. Here they pushed straight on for a considerable distance, until the lad felt certain that they had penetrated to the rear of the German line. He then led his men sharply to the left again.

If his calculations were correct he must now be behind the enemy.

The little band of British crept forward silently now and more slowly. It was ticklish work, and not a soldier but recognized the fact as, very cautiously, they pressed on.

Chester halted abruptly. Directly ahead, perhaps fifty yards, he made out the form of a single figure. Silently the lad crept closer. It was as he had expected. The man was a German, and undoubtedly one of the force which had so recently attacked them.

Chester threw his men out in a thin line, the distance between each man being perhaps twenty yards.

"Fire when I give the word, and not until then," he ordered. "And make every shot count. If the enemy rushes us give way as slowly as possible; but if they try a hide-and-seek game, keep your positions behind shelter as much as you can."

The men repeated this order to show that they understood, and all crept forward. Three minutes of silent crawling and they came within full view of the German line. It was still facing the road, across which were the British. In the faint moonlight the entire force was clearly exposed to Chester's party.

When Chester believed that he had approached near enough, he raised his hand for a halt. Quickly each man concealed himself behind the largest tree he could find.

So far they had not been discovered.

Chester glanced quickly around. Everything was ready.

Drawing a bead upon the German soldier who was nearest, Chester at last gave the command his men had been eagerly awaiting:

"Fire!"

The eleven British rifles cracked out as one, and as many of the enemy toppled over, for the British, unseen, had approached so close that a miss was practically an impossibility.

Immediately confusion reigned among the enemy. Taken completely by surprise, as Chester had intended they should be, the Germans lost all signs of formation. Before they could recover their scattered wits and turn upon their new foes, or even seek new shelter, the British had poured in a second volley.

But the German officers, displaying great skill and bravery, soon had their men under control, and turned upon the little party of British in the rear.

Chester perceived what was about to happen and cried out to his men:

"They are going to rush us! Pick 'em off as they come!"

The Germans, at a command, sprang forward, and the British fired full in their faces.

The Germans reeled, and for a moment it seemed they would seek shelter once more; but they rallied and came on.

But, as they came, a volley was poured into them from the rear. Hal's men, on the opposite side of the road, had advanced quickly, and again

the Germans had been surprised.

Caught thus between two fires, and unable to tell the number of their foe, the Germans were at a great disadvantage. Nevertheless, outnumbering the British as they did, they fought bravely, jumping quickly behind the nearest trees, determined to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

When Hal heard the first sounds of firing, and realized that Chester and his men had come into position and opened on the enemy, he quickly ordered his men forward. He himself stopped for a moment to seek out Stubbs, for fear that the little American might be left behind and fall into the hands of the enemy.

"Quick, Stubbs!" he cried. "Get up, man, and come on!"

Stubbs scrambled to his feet.

"Where are you going?" he demanded in some anxiety.

"After the Germans," replied Hal. "We are attacking them from two sides. Come on!"

Stubbs drew back.

"We'll all be killed!" he exclaimed.

"Never mind that," said Hal impatiently. "Are you coming with me or are you going to stay here?"

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone."

"Oh, I'll go," said Stubbs mournfully, "but I know I'll never get back to America alive. The New York Gazette is about to lose its best man."

Still mumbling to himself he followed Hal.

The British under Hal and Captain Anderson broke from their shelter and crossed the road to the enemy's side on a dead run, their smoking rifles dealing out death on every hand as they advanced.

When Hal's men had attacked, Chester found it unnecessary to retreat, as he had figured upon doing, and the rain of hail continued to pour upon the enemy from all sides.

The British gradually closed on the enemy, fewer now by half than they had been a few moments ago, until the circle had narrowed to within a few yards of the enemy.

In spite of the semi-darkness the aim of the British cavalymen had been remarkable, and wherever and whenever a German showed himself, in nine cases out of ten he fell to rise no more. The losses of the British had been heavy, but not so great as those of the foe.

Now, at a command from Hal, the fire of the British ceased. Then the lad, raising his voice to its highest pitch, shouted:

"Surrender!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MISSION SUCCESSFUL.

"Never!" came back the reply of the German officer in command.

Hal, who had stepped slightly from the shelter of a big tree, jumped back quickly as a bullet lifted his cap from his head.

"Too bad," he said quietly. "I would have avoided further loss of life. However, if they will have it, give it to them, men."

The fight had raged, at intervals, all during the night. Now the first faint signs of dawn appeared and a little while later it became light.

From his shelter Hal took in the situation about him. Here and there dead bodies strewed the woods, Germans and British alike. Wounded men also lay upon the ground.

Hal now decided that the battle had lasted long enough. With a cry to his men he dashed suddenly forward, the troopers following close behind. Chester, at his end of the field, perceiving this movement, also led his handful of men forward.

Some fell, as they dashed into the very face of the German fire, but the bulk of the British reached their goal, where, outnumbering the Germans now, they soon disposed of them. When all were down but a mere handful, a German lieutenant, the sole surviving officer, threw down his revolver and raised his hands in token of surrender.

Hal drew a great breath of pure relief and advanced. He was within ten feet of the German officer, when the latter suddenly sprang forward. His sword again leaped forth, and he made a furious thrust at the lad.

Although surprised at this attack, Hal was not caught completely off his guard. With a single movement his own sword leaped from its scabbard and parried the thrust of the German officer.

Chester took a sudden step forward to interfere, but Hal, perceiving his friend's move out of the corner of his eye, cried out:

"Stand back, Chester. I'll dispose of this cowardly dog alone."

But the German was an accomplished swordsman, which Hal was not. True, the lad had had some experience with the sword and had already fought one successful duel; but, in spite of this, he was no match for the more experienced German officer.

The German pressed the lad hard and, secure in the knowledge that he would not be interfered with, he tried his best to run the lad through. Fortunately, however, the lad's blade met his at every thrust. Tiring of this, the German took a step backward, and, raising his sword, grasped it by the point and hurled it at Hal.

The lad escaped being impaled only by a quick spring aside. The German turned to flee, and as he did so, bumped squarely into Anthony Stubbs, who accidentally barred his path at that moment. The two collided with a crash, and were soon rolling about on the ground.

To attack the German officer had been farthest from Stubbs's mind; but the German officer, believing that the little American had barred his path purposely, struck out at him heavily. More by good fortune than anything else, Stubbs evaded the blow by rolling quickly over, and as he did so his right hand accidentally descended upon the German's face.

Stubbs was as greatly surprised as was his opponent, but the latter became furiously angry.

"Hit me, will you!" he cried.

"I didn't do it on purpose!" exclaimed Stubbs, greatly alarmed by the anger of the German.

Quickly he rolled over again, once more escaping by a hair's breadth a heavy blow of the German's fist. Then he arose quickly and started to run; but the German was close behind him.

Realizing that he could not possibly outrun his opponent, Stubbs turned suddenly and dived at the German's legs, crying out as he did so:

"Help! Help! Anthony, you will be killed."

His sudden maneuver had taken the German by surprise, and again the two rolled over and over upon the ground in a tangled heap.

In some unaccountable manner Stubbs was the first to extricate himself, and, absolutely certain that his adversary meant to kill him, he rolled over quickly and sat upon his enemy's breast.

In vain did the German attempt to shake himself free. Stubbs, still crying for help and moaning to himself, was as immovable as the Rock of Gibraltar.

Hal, Chester, Captain Anderson and the British cavalymen had derived great amusement from this scene, and, as Hal had realized that the German, now unarmed, could not do much harm to the war correspondent, he had let the two fight it out alone.

Now that Stubbs had been returned the victor, greatly to the surprise of all, Hal advanced and induced the little American to relinquish his seat. This the latter did, though not without some trepidation--fearing that the German would attack him again as soon as he could arise--and, when he finally did get upon his feet, he put a respectable distance between himself and his late opponent.

"You fellows are bent on getting me killed," he said, turning to Chester with a frown. "You always help each other, but whenever I am in trouble you leave me to fight it out alone."

"And you always acquit yourself admirably," said Chester, forbearing to smile.

"Well, I'll admit that," returned Stubbs; "but some time I am bound to

get the worst of it. Then I suppose you'll laugh."

By this time Hal had the German officer securely bound, and at his command the rest of the enemy still upon their feet also were tied up. Then, with their prisoners in the center, the British once more set out upon their march to the British lines, Stubbs trailing along behind.

Before noon they came within sight of the first British outposts, and soon had passed to safety. Here they procured horses, and made all haste back toward their own division, where they arrived several hours later.

When those of the British troop who had gone forth with the two lads returned to their own regiment, and the lads, with Captain Anderson, took their departure, they raised three lusty cheers for each of the officers in farewell.

The three, accompanied by Stubbs, immediately made their way to the headquarters of General French. Here Hal, Chester and Captain Anderson were at once admitted, but Stubbs was forced to remain without, being told that Sir John French had no time to waste upon war correspondents.

"Well, what do you think of that?" Stubbs ejaculated. "A newspaper man refused admittance! I never heard of such a thing before."

Nevertheless he was forced to cool his heels on the outside until his newly found friends should come out, and this is what he proceeded to do.

General French greeted the two lads with a smile.

"Back so soon?" he exclaimed. "I hardly expected you before to-morrow. And was your mission a success?"

"Well, General," replied Hal, "we didn't go as far as we could have gone. We were fortunate enough to come upon Captain Anderson, who had just escaped from the Germans, and knows more of the situation there than we could possibly have learned. We figured that it was not necessary to sacrifice lives foolishly."

"You did exactly right," replied General French.

He turned to Captain Anderson. "Are the Germans contemplating any new move in the north that you know of?" he asked.

"They are not, sir," was the reply. "I can say that positively. I heard plans while I was in the hospital. The German forces in the west have been drawn upon somewhat heavily to reenforce their troops in the eastern theater of war."

"Do you believe that a new offensive would drive them back?"

"That's a hard question, sir. They are strongly intrenched all along the line, and I should say that unless the offensive were to be pushed to the limit, with some object in view besides merely advancing a mile or two, it would be a needless sacrifice."

General French looked Captain Anderson full in the eye.

"That, sir," he said gravely, "is my idea exactly, which is the reason we have not assumed the offensive long before this. I have been censured for

my policy more than once; but I would not sacrifice lives needlessly, and would wait until Lord Kitchener has furnished me with sufficient men before ordering a concerted advance."

Captain Anderson did not reply to this statement, for he knew that no answer was expected. He was, nevertheless, honored by the general's confidence, and pleased to know that his ideas found favor with his commander.

"You gentlemen had all better get a little rest," said General French.

He turned to his desk, littered with maps and papers, signifying that the interview was ended. The three officers drew themselves up to attention, saluted, and left the tent.

Outside they were joined by Anthony Stubbs, who poured into their ears his tale of woe at being refused admission to the general's quarters.

"And where am I to go, now?" he asked.

"Where do you want to go?" asked Hal.

"Why," was the reply, "I want to go where I can get some news for my paper. I want big news--something that the other papers will not get."

"But," said Hal, "you know that, even if you got it, you could not send it to your paper. The censor would see to that."

"Oh, I know that," replied Stubbs, "but if I can get it I'll get it out. You leave that to me."

"Well, Mr. Stubbs," said Hal, "I don't know where you can get it right now, but for to-night I ask you to share our tent. You may fare forth on your quest in the morning."

Mr. Stubbs made a profound bow.

"I thank you," he replied, "and I shall do myself that honor."

Hal turned to Captain Anderson.

"And you, too, Captain," he said, "I hope you will stay the night with us. You can look up your regiment in the morning."

Captain Anderson replied that he would be happy to accept this invitation, and the four immediately went to the quarters provided for the two lads when they had returned to the army from the air flight from Russia.

Here, tired out and almost exhausted, they turned in immediately--in spite of the fact that the sun had not yet sunk below the horizon--and soon all lay snug and comfortable in the arms of Morpheus.

CHAPTER IX.

OFF TO THE SOUTH.

The following morning Captain Anderson bade the boys good-by and set out to find his own regiment. Stubbs also said good-by, announcing that he must be moving in his search for news. He had been given credentials days before and, representing as he did one of the greatest newspapers in the world, was one of the few correspondents to have the freedom of the allied lines.

Hal and Chester idled about the greater part of the day. There had been a lull in the fighting, and, although they had reported to General French, no duties had been assigned them; but along in the afternoon they were again summoned to headquarters.

"I have here," said General French, placing a document in Hal's hand, "a communication that must be placed in the hands of General Joffre with all possible dispatch. I have selected you to deliver it. General Joffre has his headquarters near Soissons. You should have no difficulty in reaching him. Take an automobile and make haste."

The lads saluted and left the tent, actually disappointed that they had not been selected for some more strenuous work.

"Anybody could carry this," said Hal.

"There is certainly no danger," agreed Chester. "All we have to do is to stay within our own lines."

Half an hour later found them speeding southward, well in the rear of the great battle line. Hal himself was at the wheel and Chester sat in the tonneau of the machine. Through Ypres, Douai and many smaller towns the huge car sped without a stop. At Roy they halted for a fresh supply of petrol, and immediately resumed their journey.

But the lads were not entirely familiar with the lay of the land, and this fact resulted in throwing them into great danger once more.

Just south of Roy the long battle line--which had previously stretched straight southward--swerved suddenly to the east. The lads turned with it all right, but too soon. Instead of going straight south to the banks of the river Aisne, as they should have done, they turned eastward some distance north of this river, and were in trouble before they realized it.

Neither lad thought anything of the fact that they were pushing straight through the mass of French troops in this region, and it was not until they had come into an isolated region--an opening between the two great armies--that Chester surmised there was something wrong. The desolate appearance of the land spelled suspicion to him, and, leaning forward in his seat, he shouted to Hal:

"Slow down, quick!"

Hal obeyed without question and then turned to his chum to ascertain the reason for this abrupt command.

"We must have gone clear through our own lines," Chester explained. "If we hadn't, certainly there would be troops about. I believe we must be right between the two armies."

"I don't think so," replied Hal. "There are probably more French troops ahead of us."

"I am sure I'm right," persisted Chester.

"Well, it's not worth while taking a chance," said Hal. "We'll turn south here."

At a cross road he swerved toward the south again. But, although neither lad realized it then, they had penetrated right through the German lines where they had been thinnest and most greatly scattered. They were still north of the Aisne, and the main German line lay between them and the far shore, where the French were massed in strength. They could have turned west again at this point and probably have reached safety by the way they had come; but neither realized his danger, and so the big car sped south directly toward the enemy.

It was night now, and the machine was forced to travel more slowly, running along at a snail-like gait until the first signs of dawn appeared in the eastern sky. An hour later the lads made out in the distance a mass of troops. They were still too far away to make out plainly, but neither doubted that they were French.

But they were doomed to disappointment.

As the machine sped closer, Hal suddenly applied the brakes and uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"What's the matter?" demanded Chester.

"Matter!" echoed Hal. "Why, we have run right into a nest of Germans!"

It was only too true. The troops whom they were now approaching were the enemy, and both lads realized in an instant that they must be surrounded by Germans on all sides. In the darkness they had penetrated through the rear line, and now were in the very midst of their foes.

Hal thought quickly. So far they had not been perceived. Two men in civilian clothes were approaching afoot, and as they came up to them Hal crawled under the machine and began to tinker with it. The men came closer and stopped to watch.

Suddenly Hal crawled from under the car, and, as the men cried out in surprise at the sight of his British uniform, he covered both of them with a pair of revolvers.

"Silence!" he cried, "or you are dead men." He spoke to Chester over his shoulder. "We'll have to go straight through the line," he said, "and we can't do it with these uniforms. We'll have to exchange with these fellows."

In vain did their prisoners protest. Hal kept the two covered while Chester stripped himself of his own garments and climbed into those one of the prisoners passed to him. Then Chester covered the men while Hal made a change and transferred the document given him by General French to the pocket of his new coat. Then they bound and gagged the two men and tumbled them into the ditch at the side of the road.

"So far so good," said Hal. "Now, if we simply act unconcerned, we should have no difficulty in going through the lines. It's when we make a dash for the other side that the trouble is likely to come; but we must chance that."

"All right," said Chester, "let's move."

They started off slowly down the road and within the hour were in the town of Caronne, held by the Germans, but a few miles from the northern bank of the river Aisne. Here they left the machine to avoid attracting unnecessary attention.

They lost no time, and made their way through the town as swiftly as possible. They walked along boldly, and near the outskirts, coming upon a little restaurant Chester suggested a cup of coffee and a sandwich. Hal assented and they entered the door.

They took seats at an improvised counter and soon were engaged in the pleasant occupation of satisfying their appetites. A German officer, who had been eating in the rear of the restaurant, passed them on his way out, and, as he did so, he cast a quick look at Chester, and turned back toward him.

"Haven't I seen you some place before?" he asked, tapping the lad on the shoulder.

The lad turned and glanced at him sharply, and his heart leaped into his throat. He recognized the officer in a moment. He was the man with whom Hal had fought in a farmhouse near Liege in the earlier days of the war, the man who, mistaking Chester for Hal, had spared the former's life when he was sentenced to death by a band of conspirators in Louvain, and from whom the lad had escaped in time to warn the Belgian commander of the plot to deliver the town into the hands of the Germans.

"I don't seem to remember you," said Chester, replying to the German's question.

The officer looked at him long and searchingly. Chester returned the gaze without flinching, and finally the German, evidently satisfied that he had made a mistake, bowed and turned to leave. Chester drew a quick breath of relief as the officer stepped from the door.

"Do you know who that was," he whispered to Hal, who, although he had said no word, had been greatly surprised by the conversation between his friend and the German officer.

"No," he replied. "Who is he?"

"That," replied Chester, "is the German whom you disarmed in Edna Johnson's home and whose life you spared."

"Is that so?"

"Yes; and it's lucky he didn't recognize us."

"I should say it is. Well, let's be moving."

The two lads left the restaurant and started on their journey again. They had not gone a block, however, when they halted at a sudden hail

from behind them. Turning suddenly they saw the German officer hurrying after them.

"I can't get you off my mind," he said to Chester, as he came up. "I am positive that I have seen you some place, but for the life of me I can't tell where."

"Well, you have the advantage of me," replied the lad, his hand seeking his pocket and resting on the butt of one of his revolvers.

The two lads started to move on again, and at that moment the German explained:

"I have it! You are the lad who invaded our secret council in Louvain!"

Chester did not take the trouble to deny it, but as the German's hand went to his hip he said quietly:

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

His revolver gleamed in his hand as he spoke, and he took a step forward. The German moved back a pace, but he made no further move to draw his weapon.

"Now that you have recognized me," continued Chester, "I would advise you to come along with us. We can't afford to let you go back and set up an alarm, you know. I don't want to shoot you, for I remember that I owe my life to you. Walk on ahead of us, now!"

He emphasized this last sentence with a flourish of his revolver, and the German, realizing that a refusal to obey might possibly spell death, obeyed.

"Sorry I didn't place you at once," he exclaimed. "Then I guess we would be going the other way."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Hal broke in. "We usually go the way we want to."

Half a block farther on Hal perceived a body of German troops moving toward them.

"Step in between us," he commanded the prisoner.

The latter obeyed without remonstrance.

"One false move and you are a dead man, no matter what happens to us," said Chester quietly.

The prisoner recognized by the lad's tone that he was in earnest, and he would have passed right on, but an officer with the approaching troop walked directly up to him and saluted.

At the same moment he felt the pressure of Chester's automatic, which the lad gripped inside his pocket, against his back.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE AISNE.

The prisoner was in a quandary. To raise a cry of warning, he felt sure, would mean his instant death; and yet, should he remain silent if he was asked any questions concerning his companions he might also get into trouble.

"Good evening, Captain," said the officer who had accosted him. "Are you going far?"

The pressure of the revolver against the German's back increased, and he replied:

"I am accompanying my friends to the bank of the Aisne. They wish to have a look at the enemy on the opposite shore."

"You might invite them to go with us when we cross the next time," was the laughing rejoinder. "When we cross again we shall stay."

The prisoner also forced a laugh.

"I am likely to go across sooner than I expect," he said.

"What do you mean?" demanded the other. "Are you going on a scout?"

"Well, you might call it that. Anyway, I am going across."

Both lads were forced to smile to themselves at this. In their minds there was no doubt that the prisoner was going across the Aisne at once.

"Well, I wish you luck," said the second German officer, as he continued on his way.

"Thanks," replied the prisoner briefly.

The lads, with the man still between them, started on again.

After some walking they made out in the distance a stream of water.

It was the Aisne, and the lads, realizing that upon the opposite side lay safety, increased their pace.

Some distance back, on both sides of the stream, the opposing armies were drawn up in force. Occasional raids had been made by first one side and then the other, but there had been no real change in the situation for days. Now the French, by a bold assault or a night attack, would gain a foothold upon the German side, only to be driven back again; and now the Germans would gain a foothold on the French ground by a bold attack, but would also be forced to retire. This give-and-take game had continued for weeks.

Feeling secure in the company of their prisoner the lads did not hesitate, but marched straight through the German line to the very edge of the river. The German officer spoke to several others, as they made their way along, but Chester kept his revolver pressed against him, and he did not once offer to raise an alarm.

The three descended the sharp incline to the water's edge. There they were fortunate enough to find a small motor boat, apparently having suffered much usage by the Germans in their travels forward and backward across the river. Into this they forced their prisoner to climb, and then quickly jumped in after him.

"Head down the river, Chester," ordered Hal. "If we put off straight for the opposite shore they are likely to suspect something and open fire on us."

Chester, at the wheel, guided the boat down the stream, keeping close to the German shore.

But this plan also was fraught with danger, for a French sentry on the opposite side, espying the boat, opened upon it with his rifle.

The first shot attracted others to the scene, and several more rifles were brought into action. The Germans, seeing the boat with a German officer and apparently two friends in it, immediately opened upon the French. The latter turned from the boat and opened upon these new foes.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Hal. "This is more than I bargained for. We'll have to get out of here, or we shall wind up at the bottom of the river."

Seeing that the French and Germans were too busy with each other to pay much attention to the little boat, Chester steered quickly to the center of the river. There, as the bullets sped overhead, he felt safer.

Turning to view the scene, Hal for a moment relaxed his vigilance over the prisoner, and in that moment the latter sprang upon him. He launched himself in a desperate spring, and Hal, taken unprepared, was borne back to the bottom of the boat, almost being hurled overboard.

Chester immediately released his hold upon the wheel and sprang to Hal's assistance.

The boat, now with no guiding hand upon the wheel, staggered crazily about, heading first in one direction and then in the other, as the struggling figures gave it impetus, first toward one shore and then toward the other.

As the boat heeled over, Chester hurled himself upon the German, who had succeeded in clutching Hal by the throat and was slowly strangling him. He seized the German by both shoulders, and, putting his knee in his back, pulled with all his strength.

The pain was unbearable, and the man was forced to loosen his grip on Hal's throat. But so fierce had been the pressure of his fingers, that for a moment Hal was unable to go to Chester's assistance, and lay panting and gasping for air.

The German, who was much larger and more powerfully built than Chester, turned upon his second opponent. By a quick shift of position, he grasped the lad's throat with his left hand and with his right aimed a hard blow at his face. This the lad struck up with his left arm, and before the German could repeat the blow, let drive with his right.

There was a loud smack, as his right first crashed into his opponent's

face, and a stream of blood poured from the German's nose. Hal now had regained his wind, and jumped to aid his chum.

All this time the battle between the two skirmish lines of the armies continued. Both sides had perceived the struggle in the boat, but both were fearful to fire for fear of wounding friend as well as foe--for the very fact of the struggle proved that there were men of both armies in the boat. Gradually the fire of both sides slackened, as the troops peered intently toward the fighting figures in midstream.

The lads' prisoner, raising his left arm to ward off a blow delivered by Chester, accidentally caught the lad under the chin with his fist. The blow was a hard one, and, before the lad could recover his balance, the prisoner had delivered another resounding smack, which caused Chester to stagger back.

At that moment Hal leaped upon the German from behind. His right fist struck the man a stunning blow on the back of the neck. The German wheeled and clinched with his opponent, and for a moment they stood, arms locked about each other, swaying upright in the boat.

Then Hal, putting forth every ounce of his strength, succeeded in breaking his opponent's hold, and gave him a violent push. The German staggered and tottered; but, in the very act of falling overboard, his outstretched hand grasped Hal by the collar and both tumbled into the river together.

Chester scrambled to his feet as the two pitched into the river. As they went over the side, violently tipping the boat, it suddenly turned turtle. Chester went flying through the air and disappeared beneath the water with a loud splash.

Still locked in each other's embrace Hal and his opponent rose to the surface. Both had one arm free and struck out blindly at the other's face. Hal landed two short-arm blows, and the German sent one home. Neither had an advantage, however, and they sank again.

At almost the same instant Chester's head appeared above the water. He cast a quick look around, but could see no sign of the other two occupants of the boat. Treading water, he remained close to the spot where the water bubbled up. Two or three seconds later the heads of the struggling pair again appeared above the water.

Chester acted promptly. Swimming rapidly up to them, he raised his right arm and sent his fist crashing full into the German's face. The latter's already white countenance turned whiter, and gradually his hold on Hal relaxed. With a quick movement Hal freed himself, and the German sank from sight.

Without waiting to see whether he would come up again both lads struck out for the opposite shore.

But they were too late.

When the little motorboat had capsized, four French soldiers had run down to the bank and thrown themselves into the stream. Almost at the same time a squad of perhaps a dozen Germans had performed the same maneuver. Now, from both sides of the river, men were closing in upon the almost exhausted lads.

But the Germans were the best swimmers and overtook them first. One grasped Hal by the arm and another seized Chester. In vain did the lads try to shake off these opponents, striking out blindly at them, and calling to the French to hurry to their assistance.

In spite of the superior numbers of the enemy the French swam rapidly toward them. The first to arrive struck the man that grasped Hal a stunning blow. Immediately the lad felt his arm freed, but it was immediately grasped again by a second German, who held on while his comrades swam on to drive back the French.

Knives were drawn and the battle in the water continued with desperation. The four Frenchmen gave a good account of themselves, and two German soldiers disappeared beneath the water to come to the surface no more.

But the weight of numbers told at last; and, when two of the French had been severely wounded, the other two, realizing the futility of further fighting in the face of overwhelming odds, drew off, and, supporting their wounded companions, returned to the far shore.

Hal and Chester had put forth their best efforts to free themselves from the hands of their captors, but in spite of their frantic struggles, they were overpowered and were soon dragged back to the bank on the German side.

A German trooper had dived beneath the water and succeeded in grasping the collar of the boys' late prisoner and dragging him to shore, where several men were now at work trying to restore him to consciousness.

The men who had captured the boys stopped to watch this operation. Soon the German began to gasp for breath, and ten minutes later he was able to sit up and look about. His gaze rested on the two lads.

He was a pitiful-looking object, but in spite of this the lads were forced to smile as he glanced at them. The man arose and approached them, leaning heavily upon the arm of a brother officer.

"So you didn't get away after all?" he said.

"No," said Hal quietly, "we are still here."

"And here you'll stay, if I have anything to do with it," was the response. "You are tough customers, and no mistake, but I guess there are enough here to keep you quiet now."

The German officer turned to his fellow-officer.

"I'll take charge of them," he said quietly. "Give me a couple of dry guns; mine are no good."

The other did as requested, and, pointing his two weapons at the lads, the German ordered:

"March!"

CHAPTER XI.

A BREAK FOR LIBERTY.

Chilled to the bone by their cold swim the boys marched along with chattering teeth. Their clothes froze to them until they were stiff, and the lads moved with difficulty.

"Where are you taking us?" asked Hal, shaking with cold.

"To my quarters right now," was the reply, "where I shall let you warm up a bit before taking you before General Steinbach."

It was a long walk to the quarters of Captain Eberhardt, for as such the captain later gave his name, and when they reached there both lads were blue with cold.

Captain Eberhardt's condition was just as bad, and once inside the hut all three shed their frozen garments and drew close to the fire. Here they thawed out quickly, and the German officer motioned them to seats.

"You are both brave lads, as I learned a long time ago," he said, "and it pains me that I must turn you over to my commanding officer. I bear you no grudge for anything you have done against me, and if I could do otherwise I would. But my duty is clear. The necessity of war demands that you be tried by court-martial."

"Tried by court-martial!" exclaimed Chester. "What for?"

"You were found within our lines in civilian clothes. Had you been in uniform you would have been treated as prisoners of war. As it is--"

The captain broke off and shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"True," said Hal quietly. "I forgot."

"So we are to be shot as spies, eh?" said Chester.

"I am sorry," replied Captain Eberhardt. "I will speak a word for you, but I doubt if it will do any good."

"Thanks," said Hal.

They sat about the little fire for several hours, when the German officer, arising, said:

"Well, whenever you are ready I shall conduct you before General Steinbach."

"We are ready any time," replied Chester.

The lads followed the captain from the tent, and at last stood before the German commander. Here Captain Eberhardt briefly explained the details of the capture.

"And you say they were in civilian attire?" asked the general.

"Yes, sir."

"Then they shall be given a trial, but unless they can show good reason for their actions they will be shot."

"But, General," said the captain, "I have told you that they wore civilian attire simply to get through our lines. I can vouch for the fact that they are not spies."

"You can make your statement before the trial board, sir," replied the commander briefly. "I may as well say, however, that I do not believe you will be able to do them much good. You know our rules are ironclad."

The lads returned to Captain Eberhardt's tent, the general ordering him to guard them until they should appear for trial early the following morning.

"I am afraid I cannot be of much help to you," said the captain. "I am sorry."

"Never mind," replied Hal. "We are grateful for what you have done for us. Of course we know that you are governed by a sense of duty in capturing us, and we would have been forced to do the same had we been in your position."

"I am glad to have you say that. However, I shall do what I can for you."

An hour later all turned in and soon were fast asleep.

Hal had been asleep for perhaps three hours when he was suddenly awakened. Glancing up quickly he was surprised to see Chester standing over the sleeping figure of Captain Eberhardt. His arms were free and he had untied his legs.

Just before the three had turned in Captain Eberhardt, with an apology for the necessity of his actions, had bound them. Chester, after sleeping for perhaps an hour, had roused up, and, by holding his hands over the blaze, had loosened the knot that bound them. Then quickly untying his feet, he had relieved the German officer of his weapons, and in turn had bound and gagged him. He was just approaching Hal when the latter awoke and saw him.

To untie his chum was the work of a moment. Then the boys, in low tones, talked over what was best to be done.

"There is no use staying here," said Hal. "Every moment brings us that much nearer death."

"Right," agreed Chester. "Therefore, to my way of thinking, the sooner we make a start the better."

Without further delay the lads stepped cautiously from the hut. Keeping out of the glare of the small fires on the outside they stole away in the darkness.

At the far end of the camp, toward the river, they came upon a troop of horses picketed. Silently Hal crept forward, and with his penknife slashed the ropes with which two of the horses were tied. Leading the animals quietly some distance away, he gave the bridle of one to Chester.

Quickly both lads leaped to the saddles.

Chester now passed one of the weapons he had taken from Captain Eberhardt to Hal, and, grasping a bridle in one hand and a revolver in the other, the lads urged their mounts silently forward.

They passed close to several bodies of moving troops, but were not challenged.

Hal rode his horse close alongside of Chester.

"We had better bear off to the east or west," he said. "We may not have so much difficulty in getting across the river there."

"Right," Chester agreed. "They will probably be keeping a careful watch along here, as the result of to-day's doings."

The lads turned their horses' heads to the right, and headed in a direction that eventually would bear them to Coucy, on the French side of the Aisne, should they be able to get through the German line.

Consequently they did not approach the river bank for upward of two hours.

Perhaps a mile from the river the lads came upon thousands of sleeping men, housed in little tents. Here and there sentries flitted about in the dark and campfires blazed merrily.

Keeping their horses well out of the glare of the fires, and going very slowly, so as to make no sound, they drew nearer and nearer to the river. The Germans were some distance back from the water's edge, to escape the danger of being bombarded by the heavy guns of the French during the night, and consequently there was quite an open space between the river and the most advanced German outpost.

Their horses made no sound, and they crept between the sleeping thousands, evading, by careful vigilance, the eyes of the enemy's sentries.

At last they were beyond the German line. Urging their mounts on with low words, they at length reached the edge of the little stream.

Without a moment's hesitation they forced the animals into the icy water, and the big German chargers, after shivering once or twice, struck out for the opposite shore.

The water was bitterly cold, and the lads drew themselves out as much as possible, holding their arms aloft, weapons in hand, that they might keep the revolvers dry.

There was no sound from the German side of the river until they were in midstream. Then one German sentry, chancing to cast his eye over the distant water, made out the two forms in the moonlight.

Instantly he brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

But the distance was too great for accurate shooting and he missed. At the sound of the shot the lads urged their horses to even greater efforts, and soon were upon the opposite shore, in comparative safety.

"Well, we are over here at last," said Chester gleefully, in spite of the fact that he was shaking with the cold.

"Right," said Hal; "and the thing to do now is to find a fire before we freeze to death."

They rode forward.

Suddenly in the moonlight a squad of armed men sprang up before them as though by magic.

"Halt!" rang out a command.

The lads drew up their horses and raised their hands above their heads.

"Who are you?" came a voice.

"British officers," replied Hal, "on our way to Soissons with a dispatch for General Joffre."

"Advance!" came the command, and the two lads obeyed.

An officer approached and looked at them closely. At sight of their civilian clothes he stepped back.

"How do I know you are British officers?" he asked.

"Because I say so," replied Hal angrily. "Take us to your commanding officer at once. We have just come across the river. Do you want us to freeze to death here in the cold?"

"But he was not to be disturbed," replied the officer hesitatingly.

"Well, you lead us to his tent and we'll do the disturbing," said Chester gruffly. "Hurry up, man."

Without further words the young officer motioned for the lads to follow him, and, dismounting, they did so. At the entrance of a rather large tent the officer halted.

"I don't like to disturb him," he said, "but--"

"We might possibly be German spies," said Chester, "so you had better arouse him at once--unless you want to take the responsibility upon yourself and find us quarters for the night."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," was the quick reply.

"Well, then, get your commanding officer out here immediately," ordered Hal. "We are officers of General French's staff, and we are entitled to some consideration, if we have to fight for it."

The French officer finally entered the tent, and returned a few moments later followed by the officer in command of the outpost. To him the lads explained the mission and recent difficulties, and the officer soon had them fixed up with comfortable quarters, where, safe once more and perfectly easy in their minds, they turned in for the night, and soon were sleeping the sleep of the exhausted.

On the opposite shore the German camp was in confusion. The escape of the prisoners had been discovered, and Captain Eberhardt, held responsible for his prisoners' disappearance, was under arrest.

CHAPTER XII.

A NOBLE SACRIFICE.

"You say Captain Eberhardt is to be shot? What for?" demanded Hal.

"For allowing his prisoners to escape," was the reply of the German soldier, captured the following morning by a squad of French troopers, who had picked him up on their side of the river, where he had been on scout duty.

The conversation was taking place in the tent of the French officer in charge of the outpost. Questioned upon various topics the German had volunteered the information that Captain Eberhardt, from whom Hal and Chester had escaped the night before, was to be put to death.

"Tell us more about it," said Chester.

"Well, there isn't much to tell," said the soldier. "During the night a shot gave notice of the escape of two prisoners. General Steinbach, suspecting the cause of the shot, went himself to Captain Eberhardt's tent. There he found the captain bound and gagged. He immediately ordered him put under arrest, and commanded that he be executed at noon to-day for allowing the prisoners to get away. That is all there is about it."

Chester quickly drew his watch from his pocket and glanced at it.

"Nine o'clock," he said; "plenty of time."

"Plenty of time for what?" asked Hal in surprise.

"Why, plenty of time to save Captain Eberhardt."

"What have you got on your mind now?" demanded Hal, grasping his friend by the arm. "How do you figure you are going to save him?"

"Go back across the river," said Chester briefly.

"Go back!"

"Exactly. Didn't Captain Eberhardt put himself out attempting to save us? He interceded for us, didn't he?"

"Yes, but--"

"Well, then, it is our fault that he is to be executed."

"I know all that," said Hal; "but, if we go back to intercede for him, we shall probably be shot in his stead."

"That's a chance we must take," said Chester briefly.

"Well," said Hal slowly, after some hesitation, "I don't know but you are right."

"Of course I'm right," declared Chester. "We can't stand by and have a man shot because of us."

He turned to the French officer, who stood by with wide-open mouth while this conversation progressed.

"Can you furnish us with a couple of French uniforms?" he asked.

"Why, yes," was the reply, "but I--"

"Never mind the rest of it," Chester broke in, "we haven't much time."

The officer said no more, but quickly left the tent, returning in a few moments with two uniforms, which he gave the lads.

"What's the object in changing clothes?" asked Hal.

"It may help a bit," replied Chester. "If we went back in civilian attire we would undoubtedly be shot."

"I don't see that changing now will help matters," said Hal.

"Well, I hardly think so, either; but it may."

Attired in the uniforms of French lieutenants, the boys were at last ready to go; but, before leaving, Hal drew the dispatch he carried and put it into the hands of the French officer, saying:

"Will you have this forwarded to General Joffre at once?"

"It shall be done," was the reply. "I shall attend to it immediately."

"I guess that's all, then," said Chester. "Good-by."

The French officer shook hands with them warmly.

"You are brave," he said simply, as the lads left him.

On the river they found a small rowboat. Into this they climbed hurriedly and set out for the opposite shore. Halfway across a bullet from the rifle of a German sentry greeted them. Chester immediately dropped his oars, and, standing erect in the boat, waved his handkerchief.

There was no further shooting.

On the opposite side of the river a squad of German troops, commanded by a sergeant, awaited them when they landed. Chester approached the sergeant, and said:

"Take us to General Steinbach at once."

"What for?" inquired the sergeant.

"That," said Hal quietly, "is none of your business."

"Is that so?" blustered the sergeant. "If you get too gay, I shall have you clapped in irons and kept right here."

"I'll guarantee that you shall lose your stripes if you do," returned Chester.

The German sergeant looked at him long and searchingly. Something in the lad's face must have impressed him, for he said gruffly:

"I'll take you to the general, but I warn you that your business with him must be urgent."

"It is," replied Chester, and once more he glanced at his watch.

It was now after eleven o'clock.

"Great Scott!" cried Chester, "if we don't hurry we are likely to be too late!"

Realizing that the lads--for some reason unknown to him--were in great haste, the sergeant, in spite of his recent gruffness, hurried them along.

It was a considerable distance to the German commander's headquarters, and Chester became nervous as the minutes flew by. Half past eleven came, and a quarter to twelve, and at last they came in sight of General Steinbach's tent.

They approached rapidly, and the sergeant inquired for the general.

"He has gone to witness the execution," was the reply.

"Where is the execution to take place?" asked Chester, stepping forward.

The German soldier pointed over his shoulder.

"Nice place for an execution back there," he said. "Plenty of trees, so the sun won't interfere with the aim of the executioners. I am waiting now to hear the pop of the rifles."

Chester darted hurriedly forward.

"Come on!" he cried to Hal.

Hal dashed after his friend. Neither heeded the frantic cries of the sergeant, who called on them to halt.

It was now four minutes to twelve, but in less than that time the lads, Chester in the lead, came upon the scene of the execution. Their eyes took in the situation at one brief glance, and Chester hurled himself forward.

Standing firmly erect, with his face to the west, was Captain Eberhardt. Facing him, with grounded rifles, were six soldiers. These made up the firing squad who were to snuff out the life of the German captain.

Right between these men and their victim Chester and Hal dashed.

There came a startled cry as the Germans made out the French uniforms in which the lads were dressed, and an exclamation of alarm broke out.

"The French!" came the cry.

The Germans turned quickly in the direction from which the lads had come, evidently expecting to see more of the enemy. Then General Steinbach, realizing that he only had two of the enemy to dispose of, raised a hand and commanded:

"Shoot them!"

The rifles of the Germans came to their shoulders, but before they could fire Chester stepped quickly toward the general and raised his hand.

With a quick command the general stayed the fire of the soldiers, and advanced to hear what the lad had to say. In their French uniforms, he had not recognized Hal and Chester as Captain Eberhardt's erstwhile prisoners.

"What is it?" he demanded sharply.

"This execution must not proceed," said Chester.

The general took a step back.

"And why not?" he asked.

"Because," said Chester, "Captain Eberhardt in no way aided the prisoners to escape. It was through no fault of his that they were able to get away."

"How do you know this?" asked General Steinbach. "Who are you?"

"We are the prisoners," replied Chester quietly.

"What!" exclaimed the general, starting back.

"Yes," said Hal, "we are the prisoners."

It did not take the German commander long to recover his poise, and he advanced toward the lads.

"I thought you had made good your escape," he said. "I was told that you had made your way into the French lines during the night."

"We did, sir," said Chester.

"Then how comes it that you are back here?"

"We learned from a prisoner this morning that Captain Eberhardt was to be shot because we escaped," said Chester, "so we came back to help him if possible."

"Do you mean to tell me," exclaimed General Steinbach, "that you risked your lives to save that of an enemy?"

"He interceded for us," said Hal quietly, "and it was because of us that he was sentenced to be shot. It was no more than right for us to save him

if we could."

The general looked at them in undisguised amazement.

"_Himmel_!" he exclaimed, and added beneath his breath: "No wonder we are having such trouble disposing of these English!"

"We hope, sir," said Hal, walking up to the German commander, "that you will see fit to stay the execution."

"In that event, you will have to consider yourselves prisoners and stand trial as spies," was the reply.

The lads bowed their heads in assent.

The general threw wide his arms in a sudden gesture.

"Captain Eberhardt shall go free," he said.

He turned, and with a word, dismissed the firing squad.

Captain Eberhardt approached the lads and grasped each by the hand before the very eyes of the general.

"I can never thank you half enough," he said, and there were tears in his eyes.

"Oh, that's all right," said Chester. "We couldn't do less."

General Steinbach turned upon Hal and Chester.

"Such bravery as you have exhibited," he said quietly, "is not often seen. You are prisoners, but you have my word that you shall not even be tried as spies. You shall be treated as prisoners, and sent back to Berlin until the war is over."

Hal twisted his face into a wry expression.

"Back to Berlin!" he exclaimed in the deepest disgust, "where have I heard that expression before?"

CHAPTER XIII.

STUBBS TO THE RESCUE.

Chester also uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"That phrase is certainly getting to be monotonous," he said. "It seems that every time we turn around somebody talks of sending us back to Berlin."

"Well, they won't get me back there if I can help it," said Hal.

"Nor me, either," agreed Chester.

General Steinbach now spoke again.

"You will not be sent back before to-morrow," he said; "in the meantime, if you will give me your paroles, I shall be glad to have you as my guests."

Chester glanced quickly at Hal, and the latter nodded his head negatively.

"We are sorry, sir," said Chester, "but we cannot give our paroles."

The general hesitated for a brief moment.

"Oh, well," he said, "I don't know as it makes any difference. There is no chance of your escaping again. I shall be pleased to have you lunch with me."

The lads accepted this invitation gladly, for both were very hungry, and they knew from past experiences that the Kaiser treated his officers to the best that was to be obtained in the line of food.

They accompanied General Steinbach to his quarters, where they soon sat down to a substantial meal. The meal over, the German commander walked with them to the outside, and asked them if they would care to have a look about. Both lads agreed that they would and the general detailed an officer to show them around.

"I hardly believe you will be able to reveal what you may see," he said with a smile, as he left them, "for within a few days you will be safe in Berlin."

"I wish he wouldn't harp on Berlin so much," said Chester. "I don't like the name of that place."

After an hour's stroll the lads were conducted to a tent at the northern extremity of the German lines, where they were placed under guard. They had the tent to themselves, but guards were stationed upon the outside.

All the rest of the afternoon they sat there talking over the situation and trying to hit upon some plan of escape; but no feasible scheme occurred to either.

Night came and food was brought them. The lads did not turn in early, for they were in no mood for sleep. Well into the night they sat up talking.

In the midst of the conversation Hal became conscious of the fact that an object of some kind was trying to crawl under the tent from the outside. Silently he called Chester's attention to the spot where the canvas was being tampered with.

Presently a head appeared beneath the rear of the tent, followed by a man's head and shoulders. His face was not turned toward the lads, so they did not recognize him; but they did not move from their chairs.

Now the apparition succeeded in drawing his legs within the tent, and, rising to his feet, turned toward them. In spite of their surprise, however, the boys were too cool to exclaim aloud, but both muttered beneath their breath:

"Stubbs!"

The newcomer was indeed the little American war correspondent.

He laid a cautious finger to his lips and came toward them. Both lads arose and silently took him by the hand.

"I've come to get you out," whispered Stubbs.

"How did you get here?" asked Hal in a low voice.

"I have been here for two days," was the reply. "I came before you did, and when I told the German commander I was an American war correspondent, he was glad to see me. You know the Kaiser is seeking the moral sympathy of the United States. When I told General Steinbach that I was here to get the German side of the war he treated me royally. He presented me with a pass giving me the freedom of the German lines and has taken the trouble to show me about a bit himself."

"You certainly must have made a hit with him," said Chester.

"Leave that to Stubbs," was the little man's reply. "Now, the thing is, to get you out of here."

"But how did you know we were here?" asked Hal.

Stubbs smiled.

"I was a silent witness of the scene at the place of execution," he said. "Since that time I have been following you. When I saw you placed in this tent I disappeared, for I didn't want to be seen hanging about the prisoners. I knew you would be here till morning, so I waited till dark to come to you."

"Have you a plan?" asked Chester.

"A newspaper man always has a plan," was the reply.

He went to the place where he had come under the tent and, reaching out a hand, pulled a bundle in after him. This he brought over to the lads and untied.

The lads bent over it eagerly and started back in surprise when they saw what it contained.

"Women's clothes!" exclaimed Hal in a low voice.

Stubbs smiled complacently.

"They were the best I could obtain upon short notice," he explained. "Then, too, I believe they will be better disguises than anything else."

"We'll make a couple of fine-looking girls," said Hal in disgust.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Stubbs. "I guess you will look a heap better than some I have seen hereabouts."

"But I don't know anything about women's clothes," protested Hal.

"Nor I," said Chester, "except I know that if you don't walk just so you might as well tell everybody you are not a woman."

"That would be true in New York, but not here," said Stubbs. "Some of these French peasant women walk just like a man, so you won't have any trouble on that score. The main thing is to see if they fit."

"Well, the easiest way to tell that is to try 'em on," said Chester. "Here goes."

He took a faded blue dress from the bundle, and, holding it in two hands, thrust one foot into it.

"Here, here, that's not the way to get into it," exclaimed Stubbs.

Chester looked at him in surprise.

"How else can you get into it?" he demanded.

"Put it over your head," whispered Stubbs. "You see," he explained, "I am a married man and I know something about such things."

Chester tried again, and, obeying Stubbs's injunction, found that the dress slipped on more easily. He fastened it around his waist.

"Pretty good fit, isn't it?" he asked.

"Well, it's not so awfully good," replied Stubbs, concealing a grin, "but I guess it will answer the purpose. Now throw that shawl over your head and you'll be fixed."

Hal, by this time, had climbed into the second costume, and now strode about.

"Hold on a minute," said Stubbs. "You'll have to roll up your trousers' legs, or a puff of wind is likely to come along and give you away."

Both lads obeyed this injunction.

"That's better," said the war correspondent, after eying them critically. "Now, let's see if there is anything else."

He stood back a few paces and surveyed them carefully.

"How do we look?" asked Hal.

"It would be a shame to tell you," said Stubbs cheerfully. "However, I guess you will pass muster. Wait a minute, though, there is another thing. You stand too erect. Stoop over a little bit. That's better. Now you have it," he exclaimed, as the lads dropped into the proper pose.

"Now, rub your hands in the dirt a bit and streak your faces."

The lads obeyed, and once more Stubbs stood off and surveyed them long and carefully.

"I guess that will do all right," he murmured.

"What are we supposed to be, anyway?" demanded Chester.

"Apple-women," replied Stubbs.

"Then where are the apples and baskets?" asked Hal.

"Well, you are shy on them right now," said Stubbs. "So you will have to do the best you can without 'em. If you are questioned, which I don't believe you will be, say that you have sold out; that you have thrown your baskets away and that you are going to try to get to a place of safety."

"But I didn't know there were any apple-women near here," said Chester.

"Well, there aren't any," replied Stubbs. "However, if there had not been two, I wouldn't have been able to get these clothes for you."

"How did you get them?"

"Bought 'em."

"Then why didn't you get the baskets and apples, too?" asked Hal.

The little man sniffed his contempt.

"I would have looked nice lugging two big baskets about, wouldn't I?" he asked. "If I had tried that I'd have been shot a long while ago. I had trouble enough getting here with the bundle without being seen."

"But why--" began Hal.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Stubbs. "You fellows should have been newspaper men. You can ask more fool questions to the minute than anyone I ever heard."

The little man's feelings were considerably ruffled, and Hal hastened to assuage them.

"Don't think for a minute we are not grateful," he said. "If we succeed in getting safely away we'll owe you a deep debt of thanks."

"Rats!" exclaimed Stubbs. "I don't want any thanks. All I want is to get you fellows out of here."

"But how are you going to get away?"

"Don't you worry about me. I'll get away, all right--a newspaper man can go any place, any way and any time."

"Except in times of war."

"Well, perhaps so," admitted Stubbs. "However, I have my pass. I'll get away, all right, but not until I have found some news for the Gazette."

"But you are not paid to get killed," said Hal.

"No," was the reply, "but I am paid to get news. Now, I'll go out under the tent first, and if the coast is clear, I'll whistle twice, like this." He whistled softly.

The boys signified that they understood. Stubbs held out his hands, and both lads grasped them.

"Good-by, and good luck," said Stubbs quietly.

He crossed the tent quickly, dropped down, and wormed his way out slowly and silently.

CHAPTER XIV.

THROUGH THE NIGHT.

Hal and Chester listened intently.

One minute passed, then two, then three, and then a low whistle broke the stillness. Once, twice, it came.

The boys sprang into action.

"You go first, Hal," whispered Chester.

Hal nodded, and, dropping to his knees, crawled beneath the tent. In a few seconds, he was on the outside, where Chester joined him a moment later.

They looked around for Stubbs, but he was not there. The little war correspondent, his work done, had sought safety in flight. He realized that, should anything go wrong and the three be recaptured together, it would go hard with all of them.

The lads could hear the footsteps of the guard, as he paced to and fro in front of the tent they had just left. While to the rear and on both sides, farther away, they could also hear the tramp of other sentries, as they made their rounds.

A sentry came into view to the rear, but passed on without seeing them. Immediately the lads made their way whence he had come, and soon had put considerable distance between them and their late prison. Here, sure that they were far enough from their recent quarters not to cast suspicion upon themselves should they be seen, they walked boldly forward.

The huge German camp was asleep, for the hour was after nine and the soldiers always turned in early except when they were on night duty or a night attack by the French was anticipated; but they slept on their arms.

"Which way?" asked Chester of Hal, in a low voice.

"I don't believe we had better try for the river," was the reply. "We had better strike straight west."

"Suits me," declared Chester, and the boys set off through the sleeping German camp at a fast walk.

Row after row of tents they passed through, walking along the improvised streets until they were well beyond the main camp. Here they were still

in the midst of the enemy, but the tents were more scattered. Suddenly they slackened their speed.

A German sentry was approaching them.

Perceiving the two shadowy forms, the sentry brought his rifle to his shoulder, and cried:

"Halt!"

The lads obeyed, and the sentry came close to them. Perceiving that the figures he had accosted were attired in women's clothing, he dropped his rifle and demanded:

"What are you doing here?"

"We have been selling apples to the soldiers," replied Hal in French in a shrill voice.

The soldier understood French and replied:

"Where are your baskets?"

Hal replied as he had been instructed by the little war correspondent.

"Well," said the sentry, apparently satisfied, "you have no business around here at this hour of the night. Go quickly."

The lads needed no further urging, and, bearing off a trifle to the north, continued their journey.

Their shoulders stooped and their shawls thrown over their heads so they could barely see, they went on with slowly shambling steps.

"When we get back to America," whispered Chester, "I am going on the stage as a female impersonator."

"After this," Hal whispered back, "I am inclined to believe that we would both make good."

All night they continued toward the northwest, and when morning dawned they were still within the German lines.

"We shall have to be more careful now," said Chester, as it began to grow light.

"On the contrary," said Hal, "we may go forward more boldly."

"How do you make that out?" demanded Chester in surprise.

"Why," Hal explained, "two apple-women strolling about the enemy's camp in the night would attract more attention, should they be discovered, than in broad daylight, when they might possibly have some business there."

"Right," agreed Chester. "I hadn't thought of it in that way."

Accordingly they proceeded more boldly now.

Here and there troops of German cavalry now came to life. The lads also passed regiment after regiment of hurrying infantry; but they were not so much as challenged. Old apple-women, such as the lads appeared to the enemy, were plentiful in the German lines, and no attention was paid to them.

Suddenly the lads beheld a sight that caused them to start back in astonishment and dismay.

Directly ahead of them they saw a long trench, stretching out on either side as far as the eye could reach--and it was filled with German soldiers.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Hal. "I had forgotten that the Germans were probably intrenched along here. How on earth are we to get through?"

At that moment the two lads beheld three old women coming toward them, and Hal exclaimed:

"I wonder if we look like that?"

In their hands the women carried large baskets, and even from where the lads stood they could see that they were chockfull of bright red apples.

Chester was struck with a sudden idea. Stepping out of view behind Hal, he quickly lifted his skirts and thrust his hand into his pocket. He pulled forth a handful of gold and silver, from which he extracted several German pieces. Then he advanced toward the old women, Hal following him in surprise.

Chester accosted the women in French.

"How much do you want for your basket of apples?" he asked, addressing one.

The old woman named a sum.

Chester counted it out and dropped it into her hand, much to her surprise, and relieved her of her basket. Then he turned to a second and repeated the operation, passing the second basket to Hal.

"Now, we'll see how business is," he said, and led the way directly toward the trenches.

In the midst of the German soldiers, the lads did a thriving business, and, although they did not know it, the reason was because they were offering their wares at a much lower price than had been customary.

The soldiers joked with them and resorted to flattery in an attempt to cause them to reduce the price of the apples even more. The lads, talking in shrill, wheedling tones, joked back, and made quite a hit with the men in the trenches.

At last, having disposed of all their apples, and having come to a place somewhat more secluded than the rest, the lads sat down to wait. As they looked around, they observed that for some reason this short section had not been dug to fit in with the rest of the trenches. As a result they were out of sight of either side.

Becoming conscious of voices from beyond the little wall of earth to the right, the lads became silent and listened.

"Then everything is in readiness for the grand advance?" asked a voice.

"Yes," replied a second.

"And where will the assault be made?"

"At Soissons. The French are secure in their belief that a concerted attack will not be made for some time--at least not until the Kaiser, who, as you know has been very ill, returns to the front."

"I thought that myself."

"Well, you are right, to a certain extent. What the French don't know is that the Kaiser will be on the firing line the day after to-morrow."

"What! So soon?"

"Yes."

"He has recovered, then?"

"Practically! Therefore, the grand offensive will be resumed around Soissons two days later, which will be Saturday. The French--absolutely unprepared for any such movement--will be caught unawares, and a wedge will be driven into them."

"And the object of this new offensive?" queried one of the voices.

"The object," was the reply, "will be the same as was the object when we first moved into France."

"Paris?" asked a voice.

"Paris," was the brief reply.

"Good! And there is no chance of failure, you say?"

"Not unless our plans come to the ears of General Joffre. If he knew of the plan he might, of course, hurry up reinforcements enough to stop it."

"And if, by any chance, this offensive fails, the other plan will be put into execution, you say?"

"Yes, it has been arranged, I understand, down to the last detail. The Paris Apaches, as you know, have neither love of country nor love of fellow-men. They seek only gold. Well, a man, Pierre Duval, by name, the King of the Paris Apaches, has been reached by one of our agents. I am told he has 500 underworld denizens at his command. These, at an auspicious moment, will seize the president, who will be hustled into a closed automobile surrounded by the army of Apaches, and the rest will be easy."

"But Poincare's bodyguard?"

"_Ach_! It will not be strong enough to cope with the Apaches. Besides, the surprise itself augurs well for the success of the plan."

"Well, I hope neither plan fails."

"You may rest easy on that score. If one fails the other is sure to succeed."

Hal and Chester, from their concealment, heard the men rise and move off in the opposite direction.

"Great Scott!" cried Chester. "Do you know what that means?"

"I do," said Hal simply. "It means that, unless General Joffre is warned, the French army may suffer a crushing blow; also, if President Poincare is not warned, he may be kidnapped by the enemy!"

"Exactly," said Chester. "But what are we to do?"

"We must make a dash for it," was the quiet response.

Quickly the lads stripped themselves of their woman's garments, and advanced to the very edge of the German trenches.

"Now!" cried Hal, and, jumping from the shelter, they darted across the open field to where the tricolor of France fluttered aloft.

CHAPTER XV.

GENERAL JOFFRE IS WARNED.

A great tumult arose in the German trench as the eyes of the soldiers fell upon the two figures speeding toward the distant French line. Stripped of their woman's attire the lads had exposed their French uniforms and they were recognized in a flash by the enemy.

But, so sudden had been their dash that they were enabled to cover a considerable distance before the troops, at a sharp command from their officers, brought their rifles to their shoulders to fire a volley after them. By that time the lads were perhaps a hundred yards beyond the trench, and, glancing quickly over his shoulder, Hal perceived the movements of the enemy.

"Drop, quick!" he called to Chester.

Without slackening their speed the lads threw themselves to the ground at the very moment the Germans fired.

The bullets whistled harmlessly over the lads' heads.

They were up again in an instant and dashed forward. By a miracle, it seemed, they escaped being shot down. Soon they were nearer the French trenches than those of the Germans. Still the enemy rained bullets after them.

Perceiving the forms of what appeared to be two French officers dashing from the enemy's trenches, the French commander immediately ordered a

detachment of infantry to protect their flight. These climbed rapidly from the trenches and dashed forward.

A moment later the Germans also threw out a detachment to drive them back.

The French column fired a volley over the heads of the approaching lads, and the latter once more dropped to the ground to avoid the return fire of the Germans.

Two minutes later Hal and Chester were behind the French detachment and were making hurriedly for the trenches. Immediately the small force of French which had advanced to their support commenced to retire slowly, and soon also were safe from the enemy's fire.

This little skirmish had resulted in severe losses to both sides, although the French casualties were slightly heavier than those of the enemy. Ten Frenchmen were left on the field, while but eight German bodies strewed the ground.

Hal and Chester quickly sought out the French commander. Upon telling him that they had important information for General Joffre, they soon had a large automobile at their disposal and were dashing toward Soissons, where the French commander-in-chief had established temporary headquarters.

The distance was not great, and, as they now had no enemies to bar their progress, the lads soon pulled up near General Joffre's quarters. An aide accosted them, and carried the lads' names to the French commander. He returned a few moments later and announced that General Joffre would receive them immediately.

Hal and Chester followed the aide to the general's tent, where he stood back and motioned for them to enter.

Inside stood General Joffre, surrounded by members of his staff. He motioned for the lads to approach, which they did, and came to attention. The general greeted them warmly.

"I am glad to see you again," he said. "I have not forgotten the valuable service you rendered the French army recently. I am told you carry important information."

"Yes, sir" replied Hal.

"Let me have it, then," said General Joffre.

In a few brief and well-chosen words Hal repeated what they had overheard so recently in the German trench. The general listened to them apparently unmoved.

"So!" he exclaimed, when Hal had concluded his narrative, "they are planning to kidnap President Poincare, eh? Well, we shall be ready for them. But first I must take steps to thwart the proposed German drive. It is to be delivered when, you say?"

"Two days after to-morrow, sir," replied Hal.

"And you say the Kaiser will return to the front the day after

to-morrow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good! We shall be ready for him."

He turned to a member of his staff. "Colonel Mercer," he said, "my compliments to General Rochelle, and repeat to him what you have just heard. You will order him to fall back slowly when the German offensive begins."

He turned to the others of his staff, who had manifested some surprise at this command. "I do this, gentlemen," he explained, "that the Germans may be drawn into a trap of our own setting. Not knowing that we have learned their plans, they will probably push the attack with vigor. When we begin to give way they will be confident of the success of their plan. In the meantime reinforcements shall be hurried forward, and, when the Germans have advanced to a point I shall select, we shall take the offensive with redoubled vigor. The enemy, caught unprepared, will be crushed before they can be sufficiently reinforced."

Exclamations of satisfaction escaped the group of staff officers, and Hal and Chester were greatly impressed by the prompt action of the French commander-in-chief.

"He allows no grass to grow under his feet," Hal whispered to Chester.

"I should say not," replied the latter.

General Joffre turned to Hal.

"It is your understanding, then," he said, "that the plot against the President will not be tried until after the grand assault?"

"That is my understanding of the matter, sir," Hal replied.

"Good! In the meantime, then, we shall have time to take care of that." He turned to another of his officers. "Colonel Devore," he said, "you will see that these two lads are given suitable quarters."

The colonel saluted.

"I shall ask them to share mine, sir," he replied.

"_Bien_," returned General Joffre. "I shall probably have need of you again, soon," he added, to Hal and Chester.

He sat down at his desk and turned to a mass of papers and maps, and the lads realized that the interview was ended.

Colonel Devore motioned them to follow him, and, saluting the French commander, the lads filed out of the tent.

Colonel Devore introduced them to his own quarters and, waving his hand airily, exclaimed:

"You will make yourselves perfectly at home here as long as you may stay."

"Thank you, Colonel," said Chester. "We appreciate your hospitality."

The colonel waved aside the thanks with a gesture and strode from the tent.

The lads immediately composed themselves to rest, for it was a long time since they had closed their eyes in slumber.

Greatly refreshed by a short sleep they arose two hours later and took a walk about the camp. At a distant part of the trenches they saw a large number of troops gathered about, and the sounds of laughter rose on the air.

"Wonder what's up?" asked Hal.

"I don't know," replied Chester, "but we may as well have a look. Come on."

He led the way and Hal followed him.

Coming closer the lads cried out in astonishment. Their eyes fell upon a body of troops that they knew in an instant could have hailed but from one part of the world. They were English--but a mere handful of them--not more than a single squad.

"By Jove!" said Hal. "I didn't know there were any British troops in this part of the field."

"Nor I," said Chester. "But what do you suppose all those fellows are laughing at?"

They drew closer. Coming upon the circle of troops that surrounded a single man, the lads stared in astonishment, and then they, too, broke into a loud laugh.

There, right in the foremost trench and therefore in the more danger from the enemy's fire, a tall, lank Englishman lay, stretched at full length upon the ground. His arms were above his head, and he appeared to be resting in perfect comfort, at peace with the world.

But it was something that protruded from the legs of his army trousers that had caused the merriment of the troops gathered about. The lanky Englishman had removed his puttees and exposed to the view of the astonished Frenchmen two silk-clad feet, and red silk at that.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Hal. "Silk socks! and in this weather!"

"Silk socks," said Chester, "are clearly against the army regulations."

They approached closer.

Now the lanky Englishman sat up, and apparently unconscious of the gaze of the troops about him, produced a nice leather box, opened it, extracted an instrument, and proceeded to manicure his nails. He did it coolly and paid no attention whatever to those about him.

"Well!" said Hal. "What do you think of that?"

"That's the best I have seen yet," said Chester, laughing.

The lads pushed through the crowd of curious French soldiers and soon were in the midst of the British. They approached a sergeant.

"What sort of a freak is this?" asked Hal, indicating the long Englishman.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the sergeant. "You're English, aren't you?"

"Yes," replied Hal. "But who is this gentleman with the manicure set?"

The sergeant smiled.

"That," he said, "is His Lordship."

"His Lordship'? But what's his name?"

"Well, I have forgotten his name. We all call him 'His Lordship.'"

"But why do you permit all this funny business?"

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders.

"What can I do?" he exclaimed. "If I forbid one thing he bobs up with something else. Look at him! He's the laziest man I ever saw. We named him 'His Lordship' the moment of his arrival in our midst, and bets were made that he would succumb after the first day's march. Not a bit of it! He looked tired at the start, but he looked no more so at the finish. We were finally placed in the trenches. His Lordship did everything ungrudgingly, but he could not sleep without a pillow. What do you suppose he did?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Hal. "What did he do?"

"Why, he made a bargain with a big fat fellow, who, for four packs of cigarettes a day, agreed to let his lordship use his stomach as a pillow. He's lazy, yes, but just the same he's a fighter. We began to respect him on the day he laid low sixteen Germans with eighteen cartridges. He did it as nonchalantly as though he were in a shooting gallery. But lazy! Why, he was so lazy he would not brush the perspiration off his forehead. He asked a neighbor to do it for him!"

The sergeant stopped and eyed His Lordship.

"Look," he said, "he's going to bed again."

It was true. His Lordship had stretched out on the cold, hard ground.

"Great Scott! Can he sleep there?" asked Chester, in surprise.

"His Lordship," said the sergeant calmly, "can sleep anywhere!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GERMAN ATTACK.

A battle, as severe in its hand-to-hand struggle and toll of life as Fredericksburg or Antietam, in the American Civil War--yet in this vast conflict only an incident, chronicled as "progress" in the official reports--such was the battle of Soissons. It was the most terrific and the most bitterly contested of the great war up to date, January 8.

There, for eight days, men fell, torn with shell and bullet, and over these trenches men charged in the face of certain death.

A German attack in force opened the battle on January 8. General Joffre had slightly altered his plan, as outlined to Hal and Chester, and immediately the battle began the French made a counter-attack.

The Aisne river, at this point, is one of the most strategic positions. The battlefield covered a front of approximately seven miles. On the western side is a deep valley, running northward, which is bounded on either side by turnpikes from Soissons, La Fere and Laon.

A high, level plateau rises steeply a couple of hundred feet from the valley of the Aisne and formed the center and eastern flank of the battlefield. The plateau is deeply notched by three steep-sided ravines running down to the Aisne. Through these General Joffre, if he chose, could bring up supports unnoticed and without danger to positions on the plateau.

The French counter-attack, then, was made up the valley to the west between the two turnpikes.

Immediately the Germans had begun their offensive the French made ready for their attack by a terrible artillery bombardment. Field guns and heavy artillery concentrated their fire on this section of the German trenches, and there was such a rain of shell and shrapnel on the defenders that they were unable to make an effective defense against the French infantry attack which followed.

The French, with great dash, carried part of the German positions; but this success dampened the vigor of their artillery bombardment, which could not be continued without endangering their own men. The big German guns opened a heavy fire on the rearward communications of the French, preventing the bringing up of reinforcements.

Meanwhile, General Von Kluck, the German commander, was gathering his forces for a counter-stroke, which came, not through the valley, but across the high plateau to the eastward, a large part of which was held by the French. The surface of the plateau, which is fairly level, was crossed by row after row of deep French trenches, each trench with a clear field for the fire of its guns.

It seemed impossible, in the cold light of the day after the passing excitement of battle, to conceive of troops successfully storming such intrenched positions. But this is just what the Germans did, or thought they did, for their officers did not realize that the giving way of the French at this point was part of General Joffre's counter-stroke.

There were five successive lines of permanent French trenches, each with its entanglement of barbed wire, supported on iron posts. German pioneers cut their way through the first entanglement before the general attack, but it was necessary for the others to make the advance across the

exposed positions under fire.

These attackers, however, were General Von Kluck's veterans, who, after the famous dash on Paris, the battle of the Marne and the retirement to the Aisne, had remained in comparative inactivity since the middle of September.

They succeeded in sweeping across the plateau, first in the center and then on the eastern flank, carrying trench after trench by storm in an interrupted and irresistible attack.

The French retired from the plateau. Then they gave up the valley below and retreated across the river. The Germans advanced through the valley.

The narrow turnpikes had become great cemeteries. Four thousand German troops, engaged in the work of burying the dead as fast as they fell, had been unable to clear the field of even their own dead after eight days, while the field was strewn with the bodies of French infantrymen, in their far-to-be-seen red-and-blue uniforms, swarthy-faced Turcos, colonials, Alpine riflemen and bearded territorials.

There came a lull in the fighting. The French retained a foothold north of the river at St. Paul, where the bridge from Soissons crosses the stream; but the bridge head was commanded by German artillery on the heights.

The promenade along the exposed side of the plateau, in sight of Soissons and the bank of the Aisne, also held by the French in force, gave a rather uncanny feeling of insecurity. However, it was less dangerous than it seemed, for a slight haze rendered the group in German field gray invisible to the French artillery on the heights on the opposite side of the valley.

In the part of the field where Hal and Chester had been on the eighth day of the fighting, at the edge of the plateau, the struggle had been desperate. Here, with the final German assault, the French had fought stubbornly and a hand-to-hand struggle ensued.

Regiments of French troops, rather than retire to safety down a declivity, had contested this section of the field to the last, finally to be mowed down by the German artillery as the infantry was forced back.

Hal and Chester had taken no important part in the battle, and had remained with the little body of British troops, held with masses of infantry of the French, in reserve, and had only been thrown forward with the reinforcements when General Joffre decided that it was time to halt the tide of the German advance.

Immediately heavy reinforcements were hurled upon the Germans, and the latter must have been surprised by the fact that an apparently beaten enemy could come back so strongly to the attack. It became evident, however, after the eighth successive day of fighting, that the German leaders realized that General Joffre had anticipated the German attack; for, when French reinforcements were hurled forward in force, and the entire line assumed the offensive, the Teutons gave back rapidly.

All that they had gained at such terrible sacrifice was again soon in the hands of the French. To their recent positions the French advanced--and beyond--carrying trench after trench which had been occupied for a few

days by the enemy.

There was no staying this terrible drive.

The greatest pressure by the French was brought to bear upon the two flanks of the enemy, and these gave back while the German center held; but soon this gave way also and retreated, for General Von Kluck perceived that if it did not keep pace with the retreat of either flank, it was likely to be cut off and annihilated.

Thus, from apparent victory the Germans had met defeat. It was a hard blow to the Kaiser, who from the rear watched the battle as it progressed and stood nervously clenching and unclenching his hands as victory turned into defeat.

The first two rows of German trenches had fallen into the hands of the French, and there the troops prepared to make themselves at home. Thousands upon thousands of men were set to work burying the dead, and soon the field was cleared of the bodies. The losses on both sides had been enormous, for the battle of Soissons had been the bloodiest of the war.

General Joffre, who had moved his headquarters somewhat toward the rear when the German advance began, reoccupied his old quarters once more, and it was here that Hal and Chester, having been summoned, found him.

"I have a mission that I thought you would like to undertake," said the general.

"We shall be glad to," returned Chester.

"The little village of Pom lies just beyond our farthest outpost," said General Joffre. "Take the squadron of British and occupy it. You should be able to do so with little difficulty."

The lads saluted and departed, rejoicing that they had some work ahead of them.

The British raised a loud cheer when they learned that they were to advance, for they had had little part in the terrible fighting around Soissons, and were growing restless.

It was after dark when the little force moved out from the trenches and advanced upon Pom. They marched quietly and swiftly, and morning found them in the streets of the little town.

Here they encountered a small force of the enemy, who, however, gave way before them, evidently believing them the vanguard of a larger force.

"Now," said Hal, "half of us may as well turn in while the other half stands guard. Break in the doors of some of these houses, men."

Then it was that His Lordship, the lanky Englishman who had afforded so much amusement to the others, came to life. Up to this time he had been marching along with hanging head, apparently in nowise concerned in what was taking place.

He ran lightly up the steps of the nearest house, and, putting his shoulder to the door, broke it in with ease. Immediately he

disappeared within.

Into this house Hal and Chester also went, and instructed their men to occupy the adjoining buildings.

"We can give a good account of ourselves in here, should we be attacked," Hal explained.

"Right," Chester agreed. "But do you anticipate an attack?"

"I do," replied Hal. "As soon as the Germans we drove out report to the main body, a strong force probably will be sent against us."

"And are we supposed to hold them off?"

"We are supposed to stick until ordered to fall back, I reckon," Hal replied.

"Well," declared Chester, "we are at the very opposite side of the town and can see them coming--if they do."

They were attracted by a peculiar noise at the opposite side of the room in which they stood.

It was His Lordship, dead to the world, snoring, with wide-open mouth.

"The sergeant was right," said Hal. "His Lordship can sleep anywhere."

Almost at this moment there came a warning from without.

"Germans approaching in force, sir," cried the sergeant, poking his head in the door.

And at that moment there came a clattering of horses' hoofs, and a moment later a French officer entered the room.

"General Joffre orders you to fall back, sir!" he said.

CHAPTER XVII.

A FIGHT FOR A BED.

With a word to the sergeant to order an immediate retreat, Hal crossed the room and shook His Lordship roughly.

"Get up!" he shouted.

His Lordship opened one eye sleepily.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"Get up!" repeated Hal.

"Not on your life," said His Lordship slowly, and closed his eyes again.

"Quick!" shouted Hal. "We must retreat! A whole German regiment is about to attack us."

"All right," came the reply, and His Lordship did not take the trouble to open his eyes.

Once more the lad shook him roughly, and Chester added his voice.

"Get up out of here," he commanded sharply. "A German regiment is upon us."

"I don't care if it is the whole German army," replied His Lordship, with some heat--and it was the first time in his life that he had ever been aroused--"they won't get my bed."

"I order you--" Hal began.

But His Lordship calmly shut his eyes, turned on his other side, and went peacefully to sleep.

"Now, what do you think of that?" demanded Hal of Chester.

"Well," said Hal, "there is nothing we can do. It's up to us to save our own skins. We have done the best we can for him."

He stepped to the door and Chester followed him. They looked about for some sign of their men, but the latter had gone, and Hal, Chester and His Lordship were left alone in the house.

"We might as well make a dash for it," said Hal. "Come on!"

He stepped from the door, but, as he would have started ahead, something whistled by his head. He started back with an exclamation, and, jumping back into the house, closed the door.

"Too late," he said briefly.

For a moment he stood listening.

"What are we going to do?" demanded Chester.

Hal considered.

"Follow me," he said at length.

He led the way beyond where His Lordship was sleeping, and, swinging himself out of a rear window, quickly clambered into the house next door.

"Maybe they won't look for us here," he said. "Then, when they have gone, we can escape."

"Maybe," said Chester dubiously, "but I don't think so."

The boys approached the front of the house and looked out the window, taking care to keep out of sight from the street. But just then there came a sound of a shot.

"Wonder what that is for?" asked Hal.

He peered through the window. At the far end of the street he beheld a squad of German troops gazing toward the house they had just left.

"Guess they are afraid we'll take a shot at 'em if they rush us," said Chester. "They don't know we have left."

At that moment, from the house they had so recently quitted, there came the sound of a shot. A German soldier tumbled in his tracks.

The enemy was just beyond the town, and the others, instead of rushing forward when their companion hit the ground, scattered and took refuge behind the nearest possible shelter.

Another shot rang out from the next house, and a second German trooper, who had exposed his head for a moment, toppled over.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Chester. "That's pretty good shooting, if you ask me. Wonder who's doing it?"

"There is not much question about that," said Hal dryly. "That is His Lordship, fighting for his bed."

"By Jove!" cried Chester. "I'll bet that's just who it is."

The lads were right.

No sooner had they left the room in which His Lordship lay asleep than he arose and peered forth. His eyes fell upon the Germans in the distance.

His Lordship muttered to himself: "Why can't they let a man sleep?"

It was at that moment that one of the Germans, thinking to draw a fire from whoever chanced to be in the house, fired through the window. The bullet whistled close to His Lordship's head and moved him to action.

"Shoot at me while I'm trying to take a nap, will you?" he said to himself. "Well, if you want my bed you'll have to come and take it."

He reached for his rifle, which stood near the bed, and, dropping on his knee at the window, brought it to bear upon the first German. A crack and a puff of smoke and the Teuton was no more. A second one met the same fate.

These were the two shots whose effect the lads had witnessed from the house next door. Now His Lordship calmly left the window and dragged the bed right up against it. Then he climbed in and lay down flat, still keeping his hand upon the rifle, which protruded through the window. As he glanced over the sights he rested.

Several German bullets crashed through the window and sped above his head; but to these he paid no heed, nor did he fire until he drew a bead upon a vital spot of some German. Then there would be a sharp crack and the result would be one enemy less.

Hal and Chester also were able to pick off an occasional enemy when one happened to expose himself. But the Germans became more cautious now.

"It's only a question of time until they get us," said Hal quietly.
"Certainly they will not allow us to remain here and pick them off

like that."

"True," replied Chester. "But I guess we'll be able to pick off a few more before they get us."

From the next house came a hail in His Lordship's languid voice:

"You fellows hold 'em off a little while," it said. "I'm going to take a nap!"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Chester. "Do you hear that?"

"Oh, I heard it, all right," replied Hal, and he was forced to smile a little to himself.

There came no further shot from the next house, even when a German exposed himself. Had His Lordship been on guard he could have picked him off with ease.

"He's asleep, all right," said Hal briefly. "We need look for no help there."

But in this the lad was mistaken, as he was soon to learn.

The silence from His Lordship's station evidently had caused the Germans to believe that one of their bullets must have gone home, for they came into the open and appeared to be ready to make a dash upon Hal and Chester.

Immediately both lads opened upon them, and several fell. In spite of this, however, the Germans came on. But, as they drew closer to the house, and the lads continued to pour lead into them, there came several quick flashes from the window next door, and as many Germans dropped in their tracks.

His Lordship's repeating rifle was at work once more. The Germans drew off.

His Lordship pumped lead into them right and left as they dashed for the nearest shelter, and by the time they reached it half the number who had rushed forward lay upon the ground.

Now, from the distance, came the sound of trampling hoofs. The sound came from the rear, and in another second the Germans broke from behind their shelter and fled swiftly.

A force of French cavalry dashed into view around the house.

Both lads heaved a sigh of relief and left their refuge.

"May as well go in and tell His Lordship he can finish his nap," said Hal.

But there was no need for this. When the lads entered the room His Lordship lay sleeping peacefully, one hand still grasping his rifle.

"Well," said Chester, "he's the limit. However, he's some fighter, too. You'll have to give him credit for that."

A few moments later the squadron of British, which had advanced again in the wake of the cavalry, came into sight. The sergeant dashed rapidly toward the house where he had left the boys.

The latter greeted him at the door.

"We didn't miss you until we had gone too far to come back," said the sergeant. "I feared you had been killed."

"We are all right," replied Hal, "but there is no telling what might have happened to us had it not been for His Lordship, who is sleeping in the next room."

"What! His Lordship sleeping while all this was going on?" exclaimed the sergeant, pointing to the bodies of the dead Germans that lay scattered about.

"Oh, that!" exclaimed Chester. "His Lordship did most of that between naps!"

The Allies were now in force enough to hold the town, which they did all that day with Hal and Chester in command. With the coming of night, however, an officer appeared to relieve them. He also informed them that General Joffre desired their presence immediately.

Accordingly the lads left the little village, and midnight found them back in their own quarters. They retired immediately to rest, for General Joffre had left word that he would postpone his interview with them until the morrow.

Bright and early the next morning, however, the lads were admitted to his presence.

"This," said the French commander, placing a paper in Hal's hands, "is an important communication for the French prime minister. I have selected you two lads to place it in his hands immediately. Since you told me of the plot to kidnap the President, I have investigated. From a prisoner I have learned additional facts, which I have put into the paper you hold."

"The prime minister is in Paris, is he not?" asked Hal.

"He is. I have informed the prime minister, by wireless, that you are on the way with the message; also, that if there is any work to be done, he could not do better than to give you chaps a hand in it."

"Thank you, sir," said both lads in one voice.

"Make all possible haste," said General Joffre, waving them from his presence.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ROAD TO PARIS.

"How far are we from Paris, Hal?" asked Chester, when they were once more

on the outside.

"Not more than eighty miles," was the reply. "You heard what the Kaiser is said to have told his troops, didn't you?"

"No; what was it?"

"He told them that they were but two hours' ride, by automobile, from their goal; by which he meant the French capital."

"Great Scott! I didn't realize they were so close."

"It is pretty close; but still, when you stop to think, not so close after all; for the road to Paris, for the Kaiser's troops, at least, is strewn with insurmountable obstacles, and death and danger lurk on every hand."

"True," said Chester. "Besides which, the Kaiser is considerably farther from his goal than he was some months ago."

"Yes," agreed Hal, "he has been forced a long way down the field, as we would say on the gridiron."

Besides the document which they were to carry to the French Prime Minister, General Joffre also had given the lads an order for one of the large army automobiles, that they might make the trip with all possible haste.

Hal accosted the proper officer, and soon the lads had the huge car at their disposal. The officer also offered to furnish them with a chauffeur, but Hal declined this offer, electing to drive the machine himself. Chester climbed into the tonneau and Hal took his place at the wheel. Both waved a good-by to the officer, and, under Hal's guiding hand, the large automobile started off slowly.

Gradually Hal increased the speed, till at length they were flying along the road at the rate of forty miles an hour. There were no speed restrictions in the war zone, and as the car dashed over the ground Hal kept a keen eye out for machines approaching from the other direction.

Chester leaned over the front seat and clutched Hal by the shoulder.

"At this rate," he shouted, "it won't take us long to get to Paris."

"About two hours," Hal shouted back, without taking his eyes from the road ahead.

Through the towns of Villers and Cotterets the automobile flashed, although Hal reducing his speed a trifle when the little cities came in sight. On the road beyond, however, he proceeded to let the car out again, and so they dashed into Nanteuil.

Here, because of somewhat more congested traffic, Hal was forced to reduce his speed considerably, and they went slowly through the streets of the towns. Before setting out on their trip, Hal had spent half an hour over the maps of the road, that there might be no danger of their getting lost, and the lay of the country was firmly impressed upon his mind.

As they wended their way slowly through the streets of Nanteul, there came suddenly the sound of an explosion beneath them. Hal brought the car to an abrupt stop and leaped lightly to the ground. Chester did likewise.

"Tire blown out," said Hal briefly, after a quick glance at the rear left-hand wheel.

He walked to the rear of the car, where a spare tire should have been ready for just such an emergency. There was none there.

The lad stepped back with an exclamation of dismay.

"What's the matter?" asked Chester.

"Matter is that we have no spare tire," replied Hal. "Where shall we get one?"

"I don't know," returned Chester. "The chances are that every spare tire within forty miles is in use. However, we might go into this restaurant and make some inquiries."

Hal followed his friend into the restaurant, where Chester made known their wants.

The proprietor, a smiling and effusive little Frenchman, greeted them warmly.

"I myself have a tire that shall be yours," he told them. "It shall be taken from my own car and put upon yours. Jacques!"

In response to this call a dapper little waiter came forward, and to him the proprietor made known his desires. The waiter bowed and departed. The proprietor turned to the lads.

"While Jacques is making ready messieurs' car," he said with a bow, "it will give me pleasure to have messieurs lunch with me."

"How long will it take him to fix it?" asked Hal.

The little Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps fifteen minutes, perhaps twenty," he replied.

"In that event," said Hal, "we shall be glad to accept your invitation."

The Frenchman beamed upon them, and led the way to the rear of the little room, where he motioned them to seats at a somewhat secluded table.

"We shall not be disturbed here," he said.

A light luncheon was soon upon the table, and the lads fell to with a will, for they were quite hungry.

While the lads were in the midst of their meal, a group of French officers, all young lieutenants, came boisterously into the restaurant and took seats at a table close to where the lads sat. It was plain to both boys that they had been drinking more than was good for them, and they paid no attention to them beyond acknowledging their salutes.

One of the young officers pounded loudly on the table and demanded wine immediately. The proprietor arose from the table where the lads sat and hastened to attend to the wants of his customers himself, and soon several bottles of wine were upon the table.

The proprietor filled the glasses of the young officers, and then, at a nod from one of them, approached the table where the lads sat and poured out two more glasses of the sparkling fluid, which he placed before Hal and Chester.

The French officers at the other table rose, each with his glass in his hand; then one of them looked toward Hal and Chester, and the latter, realizing that the young Frenchman was about to propose a toast, also got to their feet; but instead of holding their wine glasses aloft, the glasses which they raised held nothing more than water.

The young Frenchman gave his toast.

"France!" he said gravely.

Each man raised his glass to his lips and drained it, but Hal and Chester drank the toast in clear, cold water. As the first Frenchman returned his glass to the table, he noticed that the wine before Hal and Chester remained untouched. His face turned a dull red, and he approached the lads.

"And why does not monsieur drink with us?" he demanded in a harsh voice, thrusting his face toward Chester. "Can it be that you are spies?"

"No," said Chester, taking a step backward; "we are not spies. We are British officers, and we drank your toast in water. We do not drink wine."

"British officers!" repeated the Frenchman. "Then how comes it that you wear the uniforms of French lieutenants?"

"That," replied Chester quietly, "is none of your business."

"None of my business!" echoed the Frenchman. "_Mon Dieu_! And what if I make it some of my business, eh?"

"If I were you," said Chester, "I wouldn't think of such a thing."

The Frenchman took a step backward at the menace in the lad's tone; but the other French officers now gathered about, and these reinforcements apparently lent him courage.

"So!" he exclaimed. "It is that we are not good enough to drink with you, eh?"

"No," replied Chester; "we simply don't drink. That is all. We appreciate your courtesy in thinking of us, and we drank your toast in water, which is the strongest drink we ever touch."

Hal, who up to this time had remained silent in his chair, now rose to his feet.

"Look here," he said, facing the fiery Frenchman; "we are on important business and haven't time to fool with you. My friend has explained why

we didn't drink wine with you. That should settle the matter."

"But it doesn't settle it," exclaimed the Frenchman, now in a rage. "You refused to drink with us because you think us not good enough."

"All right, have it that way if you will," said Chester wearily. "If you say so, then we didn't drink because you are not good enough."

"_Mon Dieu_!" cried the Frenchman, and his hand rested upon the butt of his revolver. "You have insulted me, and for that you shall pay."

With one hand still resting upon his revolver, he stepped quickly forward, and before Chester could realize what was up, he slapped the lad sharply in the face.

This was too much for Chester. Up to this time he had remained perfectly cool, but the blow in the face, light though it was, was more than he could stand. He took a quick step forward, and as he did so his right fist flashed out, and the young Frenchman, struck squarely upon the nose, went to the floor with blood streaming from his wounded member.

There came several subdued exclamations from the others of the party, and the hands of the other French officers dropped to their revolvers.

But before any of them could draw, Hal had whipped forth his own automatics, and covered them.

"I'll blow the head off the first one who makes a move," he said sternly.

The French officers made no move to draw.

The Frenchman whom Chester had knocked down now got to his feet, considerably sobered up by the force of the lad's blow. He was suffering more from wounded dignity than anything else, and he was very angry. He approached Chester.

"For that blow," he said very quietly, "monsieur shall give me satisfaction."

"I'll repeat the dose if that's what you want," said Chester, also thoroughly aroused, and he took a step forward.

The Frenchman drew back.

"_Non! Non!_" he exclaimed. "You shall give me satisfaction with swords or pistols, as a gentleman, if, for the moment, you can be one."

"So," said Chester, "I am no gentleman, eh? I'll make you wish you had never seen me, you little--"

"Hold on! Hold on!" interrupted Hal. "We have other business to attend to. We have no time for duels."

But for the moment he had relaxed his vigilance, and the nearest officer, with two quick blows, knocked his revolvers from his hand, and the lad found himself covered.

"Now," said the young Frenchman to Chester, "will you fight or not?"

"I'll fight," replied the lad calmly.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DUEL.

"It seems to me," said Hal quietly, "that there is enough fighting to be done at the front without fighting among ourselves. Besides, we have important business in Paris immediately."

"It won't take long to dispose of this fellow, Hal," said Chester significantly.

"Perhaps not," replied Hal, "but you know there is always the chance that you may fall. Then they would probably drag me into it, and, if I went down, what would happen to the document we bear?"

"That's true," said Chester. He turned to his adversary. "Is it understood," he asked, "that, if I fall, there is an end of the quarrel?"

The Frenchman bowed in assent.

"And if you kill me," he said, "my friends will not molest you."

"Well, that suits me," said Chester. "Where and when are we going to fight this thing out?"

"Immediately," was the reply; "and, with our host's permission, we shall fight right here, monsieur."

"Any place suits me," said Chester. "And the weapons?"

"The choice lies with you, _monsieur_."

"Very good," said Chester. "Revolvers at ten paces!"

"Ten paces!" exclaimed one of the Frenchmen, stepping back in surprise. "Surely _monsieur_ is jesting!"

"Not a bit of it," replied Chester quietly. "I want to get close enough to make sure I can't miss him."

"But, _monsieur_," protested one of the Frenchmen, "it will make it that much easier for your opponent to hit you also."

"He won't hit me," said Chester. "Don't you worry about that. Revolvers at ten paces, or there will be no fight."

The French officer who had volunteered to act as the other's second bowed.

"It shall be as _monsieur_ desires," he said.

The revolvers of the others, which had covered Hal, were now lowered, and the lad was allowed to pick up his weapons. He approached Chester.

"Are you sure you can get him?" he asked.

"Dead certain," replied Chester. "Look at him now. See how he's shaking. It's the ten paces that did that. He knows I can't possibly miss him at that distance, and he is consequently nervous for fear his first shot may go wild."

There was truth in the lad's words. Chester's antagonist was plainly nervous, and he and his second talked together in low tones. Finally the second came over to Hal.

"My friend," he said, "wishing to spare your friend's life, is willing to accept his apology."

"There'll be no apology," growled Chester, who had overheard this remark.

"But the ten paces, _monsieur_," protested the Frenchman. "It will be murder. My friend is a crack shot. At the distance he cannot miss. He would give your friend a chance for his life by lengthening the distance."

"Ten paces or nothing," replied Hal.

The Frenchman bowed and returned to his principal. They conversed in low tones, and finally the second announced that the terms were satisfactory.

As the two principals came together Hal perceived a peculiar gleam in the eye of the Frenchman, and realized in a moment that Chester's antagonist had some scheme up his sleeve. Hal thought rapidly, and then drew a breath of relief. He believed he had solved the Frenchman's plan and he determined to thwart it.

The two principals, according to the arrangements made, were to stand back to back, and, at the count of three, each take five steps, turn and fire at will. Each weapon had been carefully examined by both seconds and all cartridges removed but two. Consequently, each was to be allowed two shots, if necessary, and, in the event that neither fell, honor was to be declared appeased. It was also stipulated that should one of the principals fire before he had taken five paces he should be shot down by the other's second.

The seconds were the only two permitted to have arms besides the principals. Hal had insisted upon this, and, accordingly, the others turned their weapons over to the proprietor, who, at Hal's command, had taken them to the next room.

Chester and his opponent stood back to back, and Hal, who had called the toss of a coin, began to count:

"One! Two! Three!"

At the word Chester and the French officer who had stood in the center of the room walked slowly away from each other with measured stride.

Two steps, three, four, the young Frenchman took, and then wheeled suddenly and brought his revolver to bear upon the back of his antagonist, who was taking the full five strides. The Frenchman's finger tightened on the trigger.

But Hal had been watching him like a hawk. His quick mind had detected the treachery of the Frenchman before the two had taken their places, and he held his own revolver ready, as did the Frenchman's second.

As the Frenchman wheeled suddenly, upon his fourth step, and his finger pressed the trigger, Hal's own weapon spoke suddenly. With a cry the Frenchman threw up both hands, and pitched to the floor on his face.

The next moment Hal's revolver covered the Frenchman's second, before the latter could raise his own weapon--had such been his intention--and in a stern voice the lad cried:

"So this is French bravery, eh? You shoot men in the back! No wonder your principal agreed upon ten paces."

Chester, having wheeled quickly at his fifth step, took in the situation at a glance, and his revolver covered the other French officers. One of the latter, raising a hand, stepped forward.

"_Monsieur_," he said quietly to Chester, "I would have you believe that neither I nor my friends had a hand in this. Had we known what our friend contemplated, we would not have allowed the duel to proceed."

Chester glanced at the Frenchman keenly for a moment, then lowered his revolver.

"I believe you," he said simply.

Hal also now lowered the weapon with which he had covered the Frenchman's second, and the latter also made profuse protests of innocence, which both lads believed to be true. Then he bent over Chester's late antagonist.

"He is still alive," he said, looking up after an examination. "The bullet struck him in the chest. With proper attention he will recover." He approached Chester and held out his hand. "I regret this unpleasant incident exceedingly," he said. "I trust you will absolve us from blame."

"Of course," said Chester, grasping the outstretched hand. "I would be loath to believe that all Frenchmen are not true soldiers and honorable gentlemen."

Hal also shook hands all around with the young Frenchmen, and a few moments later announced that they must be on their way. The Frenchmen escorted them to their car, which was now ready and waiting for them, and, as Hal sent it forward with a lurch, they sped the lads on their way with rousing cheers.

"By Jove! That was a pretty narrow squeak!" Chester called over Hal's shoulder, as the car swept from the little city of Nanteul and sped on across the open country. "If you hadn't been on the alert I would be with the angels now."

"I don't know how I came to suspect him," replied Hal, also raising his voice to a shout, to make himself heard above the roaring of the flying automobile. "Something seemed to tell me he was up to some devilry, and I figured it out before you took your places. So, when he turned before time, I was ready for him."

"And a good thing for me that you were," Chester muttered to himself.

The car sped on.

Through Dammartin they dashed with slightly diminished speed, and, bearing off a trifle to the north, passed through St. Gonesse. Ten minutes later they came within sight of Paris and Hal slowed down.

"Well, I guess we won't have any more trouble before we get to Paris," he said. "I judge that we are on the outskirts now."

The car continued at a more moderate gait. Passing vehicles became more frequent now, and the lad was forced to go very slowly in some places to avoid dense crowds of pedestrians and troops.

"Where are we going to find the Prime Minister, Hal?" asked Chester.

"By Jove! I hadn't thought of that!" exclaimed Hal. "We'll have to find out."

They were in the very heart of the city now. Hal brought the car to a stand, near one of the city's police officers and accosted the latter in French.

"We bear a communication from General Joffre to the Prime Minister," he said. "Can you tell us where to find him? We are strangers in the city."

The policeman was very polite. He signaled another officer, who was passing, and repeated Hal's request. The latter immediately climbed into the car beside Hal.

"I happen to know," he said, "that the Prime Minister at the present moment is at the Chamber of Deputies, where he is making an address. If your business is important, no doubt you will be permitted to see him as soon as he has concluded."

He pointed out the way, and Hal drove the car slowly along the streets. They drew up at last before an imposing building, which, the policeman informed them, was where the Chamber of Deputies sat. The lads alighted and ascended the steps.

At the entrance they were stopped by a soldier, who demanded their business.

"We bear a message from General Joffre to the Prime Minister," said Hal.

The soldier summoned an officer, to whom Hal repeated their errand. The latter motioned the lads to follow him, and showed them into a waiting-room and took his departure, ordering them to wait.

"The Prime Minister has concluded his address," he told them. "I shall take your message."

Half an hour later a man appeared in the doorway. He was slender and rather tall. "Lieutenants Paine and Crawford?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the lads, getting to their feet.

"I," said the newcomer, "am the Prime Minister."

CHAPTER XX.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

Hal and Chester made a profound bow.

"I have been informed," continued the Prime Minister, "that you bear a message from General Joffre containing proof of information you obtained bearing on a plot to kidnap the President of France."

"Yes, sir," replied Hal, and from his pocket produced the document, which he passed to the Prime Minister.

The latter broke the seal and ran through it hurriedly.

"Hm-m-m," he said at last. "Not as much information as I believe we shall need."

"But surely you know enough to protect the President," said Hal.

The Prime Minister looked at him somewhat coldly, and Hal drew back, confused at having been so bold. The Prime Minister touched a bell upon a desk and an attendant entered.

"Have General Gallieni summoned here immediately," he instructed.

The attendant bowed and departed. For half an hour the Prime Minister paced up and down the room, deep in thought. The lads stood silent, neither caring to interrupt his meditations. Finally the attendant again entered the room, and announced:

"General Gallieni!"

A short, squat man, attired in a brilliant red-and-blue uniform, with medals flashing upon his breast, strode into the room and came to attention before the Prime Minister.

"You summoned me, sir?"

"Yes, General. These," indicating Hal and Chester, "are the two officers who overheard the plot to kidnap President Poincare. I have called you here that you may hear their story at first hand." He turned to the two lads. "This," he said, "is General Gallieni, military governor of Paris. You will repeat to him what you overheard."

In a few brief words Hal did so, and, when he had concluded the Prime Minister passed the message from General Joffre to General Gallieni. The latter ran his eye over it quickly, and for some moments thereafter was silent.

"And you say that this plot was to be carried out in the event that the German offensive failed?" he asked at length.

"Such is my understanding, sir," replied Hal.

"And you say a German agent is supposed to have been in communication with Pierre Duval, recognized as King of the Apaches?"

"Yes, sir."

General Gallieni turned to the Prime Minister.

"I have made inquiries," he said, "and I have learned enough to substantiate this story. We can, of course, foil the plot with ease, but that is not enough."

"No," the Prime Minister agreed, "that is not enough."

"We must apprehend Duval himself," continued the military governor.

"Exactly," said the Prime Minister, "and with him sufficient of his men to cause the others to realize that when they plot treason to France their necks are in jeopardy."

"Precisely," agreed General Gallieni. "But this Duval is a slippery fellow and hard to catch. I have learned that, unlike other Apaches, he comes of better blood; in fact, is supposed to be a gentleman. But, beyond this, I have learned nothing except the existence of the plot to kidnap the President."

"But the police and the secret service men," said the Prime Minister, "haven't they been able--"

"The police and secret service men, bah!" interrupted General Gallieni. "They have learned nothing. Their faces are so familiar to the denizens of the underworld as to make them absolutely useless. I have set some of my officers on the trail, but they seem to have met with no better luck. No; we must have men whose identities cannot be so easily established; strangers, say, who are willing to risk their lives by going into the haunts of the Apaches, and, perhaps, putting themselves in their power."

"Then, sir," said Chester, taking a step forward, "you need seek no further. My friend and I shall be glad to undertake the work."

"You!" exclaimed the Prime Minister, starting back in surprise. "Why, you are nothing but boys."

"True," said Hal, somewhat nettled, "but more than once we have accomplished men's work."

General Gallieni looked at them long and carefully. Then he once more turned his eyes upon the contents of General Joffre's message.

"General Joffre," he said quietly, "speaks highly of you both. He says that you are to be trusted implicitly and he appears to have great confidence in your resourcefulness. Upon his recommendation I should say that, if you are willing to undertake the work, you would come as near bringing it to a successful termination as any men we might find."

"Thank you, sir," said Hal quietly. "We are both willing and eager to make the attempt."

"Then," said the general, "we shall consider the matter settled."

"But," protested the Prime Minister, "it seems to me that they are much too young to be allowed to assume such a risk."

"From General Joffre's letter," remarked the military governor of Paris dryly, "I should say that they have already assumed risks every whit as great." He turned again to Hal and Chester. "Do you know anything of the Apaches of Paris?" he asked.

"Only what we have read," replied Chester. "I should say that they are of the lowest possible order of criminals."

"You are entirely right," replied General Gallieni. "The Apaches of Paris have not acquired an undeserved reputation. There is no crime on the calendar they would not commit for a few cents. From petty thievery to murder they have advanced by degrees, until to-day the life of a person who ventures among them is not worth a cent, should they believe he had a franc in his pocket.

"The Apaches infest the poorer sections of the city, notably the banks of the Seine and portions of the Quartier Latin. They seldom venture from their own haunts, and, like cats, do most of their prowling and evil deeds during the darkest hours of the night. Nowhere in the world is there a more villainous band of cutthroats. You would think that, in times like these they would rally to the support of their country, but they have not. And now comes this plot to turn their President over to the enemy."

The lads had listened with great interest to this account of the men, in whose midst they had volunteered to risk their lives. They realized the danger that confronted them in such a venture, but neither was minded to give it up because of this.

"Well, we shall have to be careful, sir," said Hal. "We will dress poorly and will show no money. If you will put us on the right road I am sure that we shall learn something of value in the course of a day or two."

"It is still not too late to draw out," said the general, eying them closely.

"Well, we won't draw out," said Hal quietly.

"I should say not," agreed Chester.

"Report to me to-night at my quarters in the Hotel de Ville, say at 9 o'clock, and I will give you your directions and what other information I can that will be of service to you. In the meantime, I would advise that you seek rest, for you are likely to need it."

The military governor took his departure, and soon the lads also left the presence of the Prime Minister, who had directed them to a hotel nearby.

In this little hotel, clean and comfortable, the lads sent out and procured some old clothes that would give them the appearance of dire poverty. Then they examined and cleaned their automatics and laid in an extra supply of cartridges.

"Well, I guess that's about all we can do till to-night," said Hal.

"Let's get a little sleep."

"My sentiments exactly," said Chester.

It was perhaps 4 o'clock in the afternoon when they arose. Outside the sun was shining brightly.

"By Jove!" said Chester. "This is too nice a day to remain in the hotel. Let's take a walk."

"Agreed," said Hal.

They left the hotel, and for an hour strolled about the city, looking at the sights of interest.

"By the way," said Chester, "what's this Hotel de Ville where we are to report to General Gallieni to-night?"

"Why," said Hal, "that's the city hall, or at least what we would call the city hall in America. I suppose that when Paris was put under martial law the military governor, who, of course, superseded all civic authorities, at once took up his quarters there."

"I see," said Chester.

Strolling along Bois de Boulogne, the lads saw, some distance ahead of them, a crowd gathered about what appeared to be a knot of struggling men. They hurried up and peered over the shoulders of the other onlookers.

In the center of the throng was a young man, defending himself as best he could, against the attacks of half a dozen smaller assailants, young rowdies and ruffians.

Even as the lads looked the assailed snatched a club from the hands of one of his opponents, and laid about him lustily, clearing a small space on all sides of him.

But the weight of numbers was bound to tell, and the assailants closed in again, while the crowd stood and laughed.

Such unequal odds did not appeal to the two lads.

"Come on, Hal," said Chester. "We can't stand idly by and let that crowd of ruffians beat that fellow up."

"I should say not," said Hal. "Come on."

Elbowing and shoving, the lads forced their way through the crowd and fell upon the assailants from the rear. The young man to whose assistance they had come welcomed this unexpected aid with a slight smile, and the three stood side by side and fought off the ruffians.

But the ranks of the latter were increased now, and the lads were hard pressed. They were giving a good account of themselves, but it was evident that, unless help arrived, they would get the worst of it.

Suddenly a tall man in a heavy fur overcoat, who had alighted from an automobile to see what the excitement was about, after a quick glance at

the combatants, uttered a cry and dashed forward, elbowing his way through the crowd.

Hal and Chester each felt himself seized by the shoulder by a strong hand, and a voice exclaimed:

"So! I have found you young scalawags at last!"

At the sound of this voice Hal and Chester stood stockstill, and from the crowd came the cry of: "The police!"

Hal glanced quickly into the face of the man who held him and his chum firmly by the arm. The face was set in a stern expression, but there was a kindly smile behind it and the eyes twinkled.

Chester voiced his astonishment with two words.

"Uncle John!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXI.

OTHER RELATIVES.

"Mr. Crawford!" cried Hal, equally as surprised.

For the man who held the two lads in a vise-like grip was the brother of Chester's father, whom they had last seen in America.

Uncle John smiled grimly.

"Yes, it's me," he said, paying no heed to his slip in grammar, "and now that I've found you I am going to take you with me."

Still grasping each by the shoulder, he led them through the crowd and pushed them into the waiting automobile. He then gave the driver an address and climbed in himself. The machine started off.

"Now," said Uncle John, settling himself comfortably, "tell me where you have been. Both your mothers are frantic, and they set me a strenuous job when they turned me loose on your trail. I have been looking for you for months. Where have you been, and what are you doing in those French uniforms?"

"But where is mother?" asked Hal.

"You'll see her soon enough," was the grim response, "and yours, too," he added, turning to Chester.

"Is mother here in Paris?" asked Chester.

"She is; you'll be with her in fifteen minutes."

"And mine, too?" asked Hal.

"Yes; now tell me about yourselves."

"Well," said Chester, "there is not much to tell. I suppose Mrs. Paine told you how we became separated in Berlin?"

"Yes."

"Well, we managed to escape from Germany and made our way to Liege just before the German assault on that fortress."

"And were you there during its defense?" asked Uncle John in surprise.

"Yes, we were there. We were fortunate enough to render the Belgian commander some slight service, for which we were later made lieutenants in the Belgian army."

"Lieutenants!" ejaculated Uncle John.

"Yes."

"Then what are you doing in French uniforms?"

"I am coming to that. Later we saw service with the British troops, and also with the Cossacks in Russia. We were captured several days ago by the Germans, and we donned these uniforms when we finally got into the French lines. To-day we came to Paris with a communication from General Joffre for the Prime Minister."

Uncle John sat straight up in his seat during this recital, so great was his surprise.

"And you have gone through all this unwounded?" he asked.

"Well, no," said Chester; "we have both been wounded, but we are all right now."

"And to-night," said Hal, "we have further work to do."

"Well," said Uncle John grimly, "I think your fighting days are over."

"Over!" echoed both lads in consternation.

"Yes. You will accompany us back to the United States the day after to-morrow. In the meantime I shall make it my business to see that you stay in the hotel and are not allowed to go gallivanting about."

"It can't be done, Uncle John," said Chester quietly. "We have duties to perform."

"So you have," returned Uncle John, "and the chief one is to return home where you belong."

Chester was about to reply, but thought better of it, and remained silent. At Uncle John's request, Hal filled in the details of their adventures, and, as the account progressed, Uncle John became more and more surprised.

At length the machine drew up in front of one of the largest hotels in the city and the three alighted and went in. Five minutes later Chester was in the arms of his mother and Hal was in the arms of his. Both

mothers wept tears of joy at having their sons with them again.

"We'll go home immediately," said Mrs. Paine.

"On the first steamer," agreed Mrs. Crawford.

"I'll go now and see about accommodations," said Uncle John.

He left the room.

"I am sorry, mother," said Hal, "but we cannot go home now."

"Cannot go home!" exclaimed Mrs. Paine. "Why?"

"Because we have duties to perform here," replied Hal quietly.

"Duties? What have you to do with this war? You are an American."

"Nevertheless," said Hal, "we have taken the oath of allegiance, and we must stay, at least until we have accomplished the mission we are now on."

"What is the mission?" asked his mother.

"I am sorry, mother, but I cannot say," was Hal's reply.

"Is it dangerous?"

"Well, not particularly so," said Hal.

"And you won't tell me what it is?"

"I cannot. It is not my secret to tell. It belongs to France."

"In that event," said Mrs. Paine, who had been a soldier's wife, "I will not press you."

"Thank you, mother," said Hal gratefully.

A similar conversation had ensued between Chester and Mrs. Crawford, with like result.

"But, if we let you go on this mission, will you then return home?" asked Mrs. Crawford.

"We can't promise, mother," said Chester.

"Then," said Mrs. Crawford, "I shall not permit you to go."

Chester made no reply to this.

Mrs. Paine also refused her consent unless Hal would promise to return home after the termination of the mission on which they were now engaged, and Hal would make no such promise.

An hour later Uncle John returned and to him the two mothers told their troubles.

"Well," said Uncle John calmly, "I'll fix 'em."

It was now after six o'clock, and all descended to dinner. The meal over, Uncle John called the two lads into his own room. Motioning them to seats, he stepped out the door, and quickly turned the key in the lock.

"Now," he said from the outside, "we shall see whether you'll stay or not."

Hal and Chester looked at each other in dismay.

"Great Scott!" cried the latter. "What are we going to do now?"

Hal looked at his watch.

"After seven o'clock," he said. "We haven't much time."

He looked about the room, and his eye fell upon the telephone. Quickly he stepped forward and placed the receiver to his ear. After some questioning he turned to Hal with a smile.

"I guess it's all right now," he said.

"What are you trying to do?" asked Chester.

"You'll see," said Hal.

He turned to the telephone.

"I wish to speak with General Gallieni," he said. "Tell him it is the party he is expecting to-night at nine. All right." He was silent a moment, then spoke again: "General Gallieni?"

"Yes," came the reply over the wire.

"This is Lieutenant Paine, whom you are depending on for to-night. We are prisoners in room number 257," and Hal gave the name of the hotel.

"What!" came the surprised reply. "By whom are you being held?"

"By our uncle. Cannot you send a detachment of soldiers with orders to take us before you at once?"

Hal heard a slight chuckle wafted over the wire.

"It shall be done," came the reply, and the military governor of Paris rang off.

Hal turned to Chester with a smile.

"I guess that will fix it," he said.

"Well, I should say so," said Chester. "But what will Uncle John and our mothers think when we are dragged away, apparently as prisoners?"

"I don't know what they'll think," said Hal, "but we are in honor bound to see this thing through, and we must not let sentiment stand in the way."

"I guess you are right," said Chester slowly, after a moment's

hesitation.

"I know I am," said Hal, and so the matter rested.

It was nearly eight o'clock, as Hal perceived by a glance at his watch, when the heavy sound of tramping feet became audible in the hall.

"Room 257," came a voice from without.

There was a loud rap on the door.

"Who's there?" called Hal, thinking to keep up the deception.

"Open the door in the name of the law!" came back the response.

From an adjoining room Mrs. Paine, Mrs. Crawford and Uncle John were startled by the pounding on the door, and looked into the hall just as the above conversation through the door took place. Uncle John immediately stepped forward.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

The French officer turned upon him.

"None of your business," he replied. He turned and rapped on the door again. "Open the door," he commanded, "or I shall break it in."

"Hold on there!" said Uncle John. "I have the key to the door. Tell me what you want with those young men and I'll unlock the door."

"I am ordered to take them before General Gallieni at once," said the officer more civilly.

"The military governor!" exclaimed Uncle John.

"Exactly, _monsieur_," said the officer, "and now, as you have the key, will you please to unlock the door immediately?"

"But what does the general want with them?" asked Uncle John anxiously.

"I cannot say," was the reply. "Will you unlock the door or shall I be compelled to use force?"

Without further words Uncle John unlocked the door, and the officer, followed by two of his men, strode in. They approached the two lads.

"You are under arrest," said the officer briefly.

Mrs. Paine and Mrs. Crawford attempted to reach their sons, but the soldiers barred their progress.

"Don't worry, mother," said Hal, as they were led by, and he smiled.

Uncle John caught the smile and a great light dawned upon him.

"Well, by George!" he said to himself, "I didn't think they had it in 'em."

He allayed the fears of the anxious mothers by telling them what he had

discovered.

CHAPTER XXII.

INTO THE UNDERWORLD.

Hal did not see the look of understanding upon Uncle John's face, as they were led along, but Chester did. He smiled to himself.

"Uncle John has caught on," he said to his friend.

"Caught on?" echoed Hal.

"Yes. He knows that we have hoodwinked him."

"So much the better, then," said Hal. "It will save our mothers some worry." He turned to the officer who conducted them as soon as they were out on the street. "It's all right now," he said. "We can go the rest of the way alone."

"Perhaps you can," was the reply, "but you won't. You'll come right along with us."

"But," protested the lad, "we must first go to our other hotel and get the clothes we have secured for our work."

"You will have to talk to General Gallieni about that," said the officer gruffly.

"But General Gallieni knows all about our plans."

"Does he? I'm not so sure. However, I guess he will before long?"

"Look here," said Hal, "what's the matter with you?"

"Come, now," said the officer, "that's enough of that. March."

Chester broke into a laugh, and Hal glanced at him in surprise.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded.

"Why," said Chester, "I am laughing because you can't see through this."

"Is that so?" said Hal, somewhat nettled. "Perhaps you can see through it?"

"Of course," said Chester. "General Gallieni simply sent this squad after us. He didn't explain the situation to the officer."

"By Jove!" said Hal. "Now, why didn't I think of that? It's plain enough, now that you speak of it."

They marched along in silence, and soon were ushered into the presence of General Gallieni. The latter dismissed the other officers with a wave of his hand and turned to the lads.

"Well, I see you escaped," he said, with a semblance of a smile on his grim features.

"Yes, sir; thanks to you, sir," said Hal, also smiling.

"Thank yourselves," said the general. "It took some resourcefulness to think of such a plan. It proves to me that you can use your heads. I am, therefore, more confident that you may be successful in your desperate work."

Hal and Chester were greatly flattered by this high praise, but they simply saluted and said:

"Thank you, sir."

"Now," said the general, "you may as well go about the work at once. Further delay is useless. But you cannot go in those uniforms. Didn't you lay in some other clothes, as you suggested?"

"We did, sir," replied Hal, "but the officer who conducted us here wouldn't let us go after them."

"True," said the general. "I didn't explain the situation to him, because I feared that he might possibly give the _coup_ away. Perhaps I can fix you up here, however."

He struck a little bell on his desk a sharp tap. Immediately an orderly entered and to him the general spoke briefly. The orderly saluted and departed, returning a few moments later with a bundle of ragged clothing.

"You may go into the next room and change," said the general, and the lads hastened to obey.

Ten minutes later, dirty, ragged and unkempt, they once more stood before General Gallieni. The latter surveyed them critically.

"You'll do," he said at last, with an approving nod. "Now--are you armed?"

"Two automatics each, sir, and a good supply of cartridges," said Hal.

"_Bien_! Here," the general handed each a little silver whistle, "should you ever be in a tight place and in need of assistance, blow these, and, if help is near, you will get it."

The lads shoved the whistles out of sight in the clothes.

"I guess that is about all," said the general. "Remember, the main thing I want is Duval. Establish his true identity and learn where he can be found and you will have done enough. The rest of the work will be for other hands. By the way, if I were you, I would go first to the _Quartier Latin_, and loiter about there. You know where it is?"

"No, sir," said Hal.

The general gave them the necessary directions and then rose.

"That is all," he said, and the lads, realizing that their interview was

at an end, saluted and took their departure.

For an hour they walked along the streets, and at last found themselves in the midst of the Latin Quarter of the French capital. Here they saw many others of their own apparent ilk, dressed in rags, dirty, and carrying a certain hangdog and famished look.

"Guess we are in the right place," said Hal to Chester in a low voice.

"Looks like it," said Hal, "but the question is, how are we going to find out anything?"

"We'll have to trust to luck," said Chester.

But Dame Fortune smiled upon them sooner than they could possibly have anticipated, and it came about in this wise:

As the lads walked slowly along they were attracted by a terrible din and confusion in the distance. They stopped for a moment and listened and then went forward swiftly.

Rounding a corner into a dark side street they came abruptly upon the scene of the confusion. A dirty little street Arab was defending himself with bravery and skill against an overwhelming number of other rowdies. The little fellow was fighting with tooth, nail and foot, but in spite of his agility and stubbornness, he was getting the worst of the encounter.

He went down and the others piled on top of him.

"Come on, Hal," exclaimed Chester, "let's give the fellow a hand."

"All right," agreed the latter; "but, remember, no guns. It would give us away."

They dashed quickly forward, and, striking out right and left, cleared a path for themselves and were soon at the side of the fallen man. While Hal stood off the enemy Chester bent down and lifted the little man to his feet. The latter recognized the touch of a friendly hand and quickly jumped up.

"Thanks," he said briefly, and jumped to Hal's side to renew the encounter.

Chester sprang forward with him. And these reinforcements reached Hal none too soon, for he was being sorely pressed by his foes. One of the enemy, making a slight detour, suddenly launched himself headlong at Hal, and came down on his shoulder, and with his talon-like fingers clawed at the lad's face.

With a quick twist of his arm the lad succeeded in catching his opponent by the throat, and, exerting great pressure with his other arm, bore upward heavily. There was a choking screech from the man and he lay limp in Hal's arms. Then the lad, raising him at arm's length, dashed him full in the faces of the foe.

The little man to whose help the lads had come took this in out of the tail of his eye.

"_Bien! Bien!_" he exclaimed, and dashed forward.

Hal and Chester were right behind him.

Hal struck out with his right, and one of the enemy toppled over with an oath. Another went down before his left fist. Chester, with a heavy blow, felled another of their opponents, and the little man, snarling and fighting with hands and feet, quickly disposed of two more.

The enemy drew back and the three had time for a breathing spell. Their foes, however, had no mind to give up the fight, and with a sudden concerted dash, surrounded the trio.

The fighting became fast and terrific. The weight of numbers was beginning to tell, and suddenly Chester went down before a heavy smash on the jaw. He was badly shaken up, but was not unconscious. As he scrambled to his feet, the clear sound of a whistle shattered the night. Immediately the fighting stopped and the assailants drew back.

"_Les Gendarmes_!" exclaimed one, and took to his heels, followed by the rest.

"_Les Gendarmes_!" exclaimed the little man to whose assistance the lads had come. "_Voila_!"

Chester got to his feet quickly, and, with Hal, dashed forward upon the heels of the little man. Round corner after corner, through dark streets and darker alleys he ran, the lads following close behind him. Finally, out of breath and tired of limb and body, he came to a halt in a secluded spot in a narrow street.

The lads came to a stop beside him. The man immediately threw himself upon the ground and the lads did likewise. Here, for a few moments, all lay silent, panting.

Finally the little man spoke.

"You came to my aid just in time," he said, "and I thank you. But for you I should have been killed."

"Killed!" exclaimed Hal. "And why would they have killed you?"

"Because," said the little man, "I myself picked the pocket of a man whom one of their number was trailing."

"I see," said Chester, manifesting no surprise, for he was well aware that the street Arab had taken them for his own kind. To have betrayed surprise would have been to invite suspicion.

"Now," said the little man, "we shall have to hide. The police will be scouring the neighborhood. Have you a refuge handy?"

"No," said Hal.

"Then you shall come with me." He hesitated a moment, then added: "Which do you love best, your country or gold?"

Hal took a long chance.

"Gold," he said briefly.

The little man slapped him familiarly on the back.

"As all true Apaches!" he exclaimed. "_Bien_! Then you shall come with me."

He led the way along the dark street and the lads followed him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE APACHE DEN.

Before a low-lying, tumble-down wooden shack of but a single story the little man paused and glanced furtively about. Then he darted quickly up the steps, and, motioning to the lads to follow him, disappeared within.

Inside Hal and Chester found themselves in what appeared to be a narrow passageway. It was damp and evil-smelling and the darkness was intense. The lads were unable to see a yard in front of them. The voice of the little man pierced the darkness.

"Come," he said, and the lads advanced in the darkness.

They came presently to a flight of stairs, leading down, and they descended slowly, feeling their way that they might not fall. At the bottom there was still nothing but darkness. Here their guide was waiting for them and allowed them to pass. A moment and there came to the ears of the lads a dull clang, as if a heavy iron door had been closed behind them.

And this, in truth, was the case.

Ahead of them in the dark hall their guide had opened the door without their knowledge that such a thing existed, and now that they had passed through he closed it again. The lads waited until he again brushed by them and took the lead. Then they followed.

It seemed to Hal and Chester that the passageway wound about considerably, for they were conscious of making several sharp turns. Then, from ahead, a faint glow of light pierced the darkness and they could make out their surroundings. In the rear it was perfectly dark and on each side of the narrow passageway the dark, grimy walls rose sheer for perhaps twenty-five feet. The place reeked with the smell of foul air and tobacco smoke.

Now that the light shattered the blackness the little man, who had advanced as soft-footed and as sure-footed as a cat in spite of the darkness, increased his stride and made toward the light. He brought up directly against another door, through cracks in which the light streamed. Here he turned to Hal and Chester.

"I am Jean Garnier," he said. "And you?"

"Hugo Choteau," replied Hal, giving the first name that came into his mind.

"I am Victor Doubet," said Chester, and added to himself, "I hope I can remember it."

He kept repeating it over and over to himself, that he might grow accustomed to it.

"_Bien_," said Jean. "Come! I shall introduce you to my friends."

He knocked sharply on the door--three light taps, followed by one loud tap.

From within came the sound of scraping chairs, followed by footsteps approaching the door. Came the sound of bars being removed and placed on the floor and a bolt shot back with a crash. Light immediately flooded the passageway as the door was opened a crack and an evil-looking face peered forth.

"Oh, it is you, Jean," he said, after peering intently at the lads' guide. "Come in."

He threw the door open wider.

"Yes, it is I," said the Apache, "and with me two friends."

"If they are friends of yours they are welcome," said the man inside.

The three entered the room together and the man who had opened the door immediately re-bolted and re-barred it.

Inside Hal and Chester looked quickly about, but still not so as to give an impression of undue curiosity. The room was perfectly bare, except for a single large table and probably fifty old wooden chairs, which were scattered about without regard to order. At the far end of the room there was another door, but except for this there was no means of egress.

In various parts of the room sat perhaps a dozen men, all of evil visage, their hats pulled low over their eyes, cigarettes protruding from their lips at a drooping angle. They paid no heed to the entrance of Jean, Hal and Chester, although, from under their hats, they eyed them keenly.

Jean turned to the man who had admitted them and introduced the two lads with a flourish of his right hand.

"These, Georges," he said, "are my friends, Hugo Choteau and Victor Doubet, who, but a few moments since, saved me from death."

Georges' only reply was a grunt. Plainly he was little interested in the newcomers, as long as they were vouched for by Jean, and he showed no interest in Jean's recent escape from death. Apparently this was no novelty. He resumed his seat at the table, and putting up his feet and drawing his hat even farther over his face, lighted a cigarette and settled himself in comfort and closed his eyes.

Now that he had piloted them to safety Jean took no further thought of the boys, but himself dropped into a chair, propped his feet up, lighted a cigarette and followed Georges' example.

Hal and Chester also sank into chairs and did likewise, both, however,

keeping one eye open.

Directly Jean sat up and from his pocket produced a pack of cigarettes, which he extended to Hal.

"Smoke?" he said laconically.

Hal was in a quandary. He was not a smoker himself, yet he realized that the Paris Apache who was not a victim of nicotine was indeed a scarce article. But he muttered to himself, as he selected a cigarette and passed the pack on to Chester:

"Here is where smoking a cigarette may save our lives."

Chester's mind followed along on this course, and, after passing the pack back to Jean, and accepting a match, both lads lighted up in most approved fashion.

The wants of his guests thus attended to, Jean left them to their own thoughts, and gave them no further notice.

The Apache is not a talkative man, and therefore there was not the sound of a human voice to break the death-like stillness of the foul-smelling den. For perhaps an hour and a half all sat without so much as moving.

Suddenly the stillness was shattered by a resounding knock on the door by which the lads had so recently entered--three light taps, followed by a single loud tap. Immediately Georges was upon his feet again, and unlocked and unbarred the door and peered out. Then he threw wide the door and another man entered the room.

Now there was something in the appearance of this newcomer that set him somewhat apart from the other inmates of the den, and when he spoke his tones were much softer than the voices of the true Apache; but it carried an evil ring.

"The chief will be here within the hour," he said to Georges. "He desires that you have all here before he arrives."

"It shall be done," replied Georges, eying the newcomer with some disfavor because of his pomposity.

The newcomer walked across the room and sat down. As he did so his eyes fell upon Hal and Chester, slouched back in their chairs. Immediately he was on his feet.

"Who are these?" he demanded of Georges. "Their faces are unfamiliar to me."

"Friends of Jean Garnier," replied Georges briefly.

Jean was immediately on his feet and approached the questioner.

"Yes, they are friends of mine," he said, "and, as true Apaches, they love gold better than anything else. What have you to say about it?" and his hand slipped to his belt.

It was plain to Hal and Chester that the man was not frightened by this show of hostility, for he smiled slightly and shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, nothing at all," he said. "What are one or two Apaches more or less? You are all of the same breed."

He turned his back on Jean and sat down. Producing a monogrammed cigarette case he opened it, extracted a cigarette, and lighted up. He paid no further heed to those about him.

Hal and Chester, out of the tail of their eyes, surveyed him critically. The man had now removed his overcoat and the lads saw that his clothes were neatly pressed and of good texture. A diamond glistened in his tie. Plainly he was no Apache.

Georges, in the meantime, had been busy. He aroused several of the apparently sleeping men, spoke a few words to them, and the latter hurried away. Some minutes later they returned, and after them came others. These drifted in gradually now and slunk into chairs. When the supply of chairs had been exhausted newcomers sat on the floor.

Soon the room was full to overflowing.

The man who had accosted Hal and Chester now threw away his cigarette and once more approached the lads. Jean, perceiving this, also left his chair and came forward.

The man whom Hal and Chester surmised was some sort of a lieutenant of the Apache chief, addressed them.

"Do you know what we are here for?" he asked.

"No," said Hal.

Chester also shook his head.

"Well, I'll tell you," said the man. "We are here to make money. The President is sought by the Germans, and we are to see that he is delivered safely into their hands. For this each man is to receive a handful of German gold. Now, it makes little difference whether you are with us or not. If you are with us, all right--we can use a few more men. If not, you will never leave here alive."

Before either Hal or Chester could reply Jean stepped forward.

"Of course they are with us," he said, thrusting his face close to that of the lads' questioner.

Calmly the man extended one hand, placed it squarely over Jean's face and shoved him violently backward.

"This," he said quietly, "is none of your business. So keep out."

The little man uttered a cry of rage and made as if to draw a knife; but, apparently thinking better of it, returned to his chair and subsided.

The man turned to Hal.

"Are you with us?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Hal.

"And you?" turning to Chester.

"Yes."

There came a commanding knock on the door. Georges sprang forward and flung it wide, and there strode into the room a tall, slender man, in evening dress, shining top hat and white kid gloves. A black mask covered his face.

"Pierre Duval," whispered Hal to Chester, "the King of the Apaches!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE APACHE CHIEF.

Immediately all in the room rose to their feet, Hal and Chester doing likewise. Duval strode straight to the table in the center of the room without so much as a glance about, and sat down at its head. Then the others resumed their seats.

Duval turned to Georges.

"Are we all here?" he demanded, in a low, soft voice.

"Yes, sir," replied Georges, "and two besides."

"Bring the strangers before me," ordered the chief.

At a sign from Georges, Hal and Chester advanced and stood before the Apache king. The latter surveyed them long and carefully through his mask.

"Names?" he asked briefly.

The lads gave their assumed ones.

"You know what we are here for?" was the next question.

The lads signified that they did.

"And you are with us?"

"Yes," both replied.

"_Bien_! Back to your places."

The lads retired.

Now Duval rose and addressed the others.

"Since our last meeting it has been decided not to kidnap the President," he said slowly.

Exclamations of disappointment escaped the men sitting about.

"But," continued Duval, "there nevertheless will be work for some of us that will mean additional gold for all."

Cries of satisfaction greeted this statement.

"It has been decided," Duval went on, emphasizing each word, "that the President must be put out of the way. Are there any present who object to this?"

He swept the room with his gaze.

Hal and Chester, although taken somewhat aback by this cold-blooded statement, manifested no surprise. Neither was there a word from any of the assemblage, and Duval continued again:

"Now, for the honor of accomplishing this work you shall draw lots."

From his pocket he produced a small box.

"In here," he said calmly, "are enough balls so that each may have one. With the exception of two, all are black. The first man to select a red ball--his shall be the fortune to do the work; and to him goes an extra gold piece.

"That there may be no treachery, the man who picks the second red ball shall follow the first; and, in the event that he shows signs of a soft heart, or manifests a desire to give a warning, the second man shall kill him. Is that plain to you?"

Cries of "yes, yes" filled the room.

"All right, then," said Duval. "We shall now proceed with the drawing."

He opened one side of the box, and motioned for the first man to approach. The latter did so, drew forth a ball and exposed it to view. It was black, and the man passed on.

Man after man drew and each pulled forth a black ball. Now it came Chester's turn, and so far neither red ball had been drawn.

Slowly the lad approached with his heart in his mouth. To himself he muttered:

"I'll draw a red one just as sure as I stand here. I can feel it!"

For a moment he hesitated, and Duval's keen eyes caught the sign of indecision. He half rose to his feet.

"We want no chicken-hearts," he said. "However, draw or not, as you choose."

Chester caught the cold menace in the tone, and he realized that should he fail to draw, knowing what he did of the plot, he would never leave the room alive.

He thrust his hand into the box, clutched an elusive ball and drew it forth. He looked at it quickly and held it aloft.

The ball was red!

Immediately the men crowded about him and slapped him on the back.

"You are a lucky dog," exclaimed Jean; "an extra gold piece you'll get."

Chester had been so sure that he would draw one of the red balls that he felt no surprise. Hal, however, was greatly agitated, and he concealed his anxiety with an effort, as, being next in line, he also advanced to draw.

"If I can get the other red one," he said to himself, "it may work out all right."

The same thought had struck Chester, and he leaned forward anxiously. Hal thrust his hand into the box, then drew it forth again; and the ball that he held up was black.

The lad heaved a sigh of disappointment as he returned to his place.

"Never mind," said Chester, "it will come out all right."

Next to the last man to draw was Jean Garnier. He thrust his hand quickly into the box and pulled forth the second red ball. He was so elated that he cried out with joy. Then he ran to Chester and slapped him on the back.

"Perhaps," said he, "we can work this together and share equally in the prize."

Before Chester could reply, Duval rose once more to his feet and ordered that all leave the room except those who held the red balls. Slowly the men filed out, Hal being among the last to go. Outside the lad walked some distance from the house, then, when he felt certain that the others had disappeared, returned, and concealed himself in a dark alleyway across the street, where he waited patiently for Chester to emerge.

As soon as the others had left the room, Duval called Chester and Jean to him, and spoke in a low voice.

"This work must not be bungled," he said sternly. Then, to Jean, "and you are to see that it is not bungled. If this Victor makes one false move, you know what to do?"

Jean nodded his head in the affirmative.

"But," he added, "Victor will make no false move."

"I feel sure of that," replied Duval, "or I should not allow him to leave here alive."

Then he addressed Chester.

"The President," he said, "will make an address from the steps of the Palace to-morrow at noon. I shall expect you to be in the crowd. When the proper moment comes, you will know what to do. Jean will be there to see you do it, and I myself shall be on hand to see that you both obey. Am I understood?"

"Yes," said Chester.

Jean likewise nodded affirmatively.

"All right, then. Are you armed?"

Jean shook his head negatively, and so did Chester, in spite of the fact that he had two automatics concealed in his clothes, for he did not think it wise to betray this to Duval.

From his pockets the Apache chief produced a pair of automatics, one of which he handed to each. Then he dismissed them with a flourish of his hand.

Jean led the way along the dark passageway and into the street. Hal, from his place of concealment, saw them emerge and followed them. A short distance from the den he came up with them. Jean, as well as Chester, was delighted to see him.

"Why," said Jean, "can't we all work together and make sure that the plot does not fail?"

"An excellent idea," said Chester.

He spoke to Hal in a whisper: "Watch the house and follow Duval when he comes out."

Hal, accordingly, did not fall in with Jean's plan.

"I am glad to be out of it," he said. "It's too dangerous to suit me. No, Victor, there, is different. He likes the spice of danger, and so may you. But I prefer to get my gold easier, in the streets."

Jean shrugged his shoulders in contempt.

"I thought you were a brave man," he said. "Come on, Victor; we have no time for cowards."

He took Chester by the arm and the two walked off down the street, while Hal again concealed himself in the dark alley opposite the Apaches' den, where he waited for Duval to emerge.

His patience was soon rewarded. A dim figure appeared in the doorway and peered cautiously about. Then it slipped quietly to the street and strode rapidly away in the darkness. Hal slipped from his concealment and, keeping a respectable distance behind, set out in pursuit. For several blocks Duval continued slowly; then stopped suddenly at a corner. Hal immediately slunk from sight into the shelter of a doorway.

Duval raised a hand, and a moment later a taxi dashed up and stopped before him. Duval climbed in and the taxi moved away.

Hal, however, was not to be shaken off thus easily. Running forward quickly he succeeded in catching hold of the taxi and pulling himself up behind. In this way he rode for perhaps half an hour.

Abruptly the machine came to a halt and Hal quickly jumped to the ground and into a doorway, where he peered forth in time to see Duval alight.

The man was now without a mask, and Hal perceived the clear countenance of a Frenchman of the upper class, whose age must have been somewhere in the thirties. He strode rapidly down the street, and, turning a corner, mounted the steps of a handsome residence just beyond. Hal came around the corner just in time to see his quarry enter the door.

The lad took the number of the house and also the name of the street. These he impressed firmly upon his memory by repeating them over and over. Then he quietly ascended the steps of the house and tried the door. It was locked.

The lad descended the steps again and walked round the house, seeking some other means of entrance. In the narrow areaway he saw a small window, apparently opening into the cellar. He tried it. It was unlocked and gave easily before the pressure of his hand.

Hal lay flat upon the ground and pushed his feet through the opening. Then, slowly, he let his body through until he hung by his hands. He did not know how far his feet might be from the floor, but it was no time to hesitate. He released his hold and dropped.

There came a crash so loud it might have raised the dead.

CHAPTER XXV.

CHESTER AND JEAN.

Chester was confident that Hal could take care of his end of the affair, and he therefore allowed Jean to lead him along without protest. Jean became talkative as they walked along the dark streets.

"It should be easy," he said with enthusiasm. "All we have to do is to get close to the President in the crowd. Can you shoot?"

"A little," replied Chester briefly.

"I'm not a bad shot, either," said Jean. "So, if you should miss with your first shot, I'll turn loose myself. That will insure success."

"I have been thinking," said Chester, "how it would feel to be shot, and of what is likely to happen to us after we fire. What will the crowd do to us?"

"Oh, we'll get away, all right," said Jean.

"We'll never get away," said Chester solemnly. "We shall be torn to pieces before we can move a foot."

"I hadn't stopped to think of that," said Jean slowly.

"No, I suppose not," replied Chester. "Nevertheless, that is what is bound to happen. And they won't kill us on the spot, either. They'll put us to death slowly, by torture."

The lad looked sharply at his companion. Plainly this was an aspect of

the case which had not occurred to Jean. He shuddered.

"Do you realize what we are about to do?" Chester went on. "We are going to shoot down, in cold blood, the President of France; the President of our own country. The crowd will go wild. We shall be torn limb from limb."

"Stop it! Stop it!" cried Jean. "Would you have me lose my nerve?"

"And besides," continued Chester, "what has the President done to us that we should seek his life?"

"But," said Jean, "we shall have gold."

"And what good will gold do us after we are dead?"

"True," said Jean. "It won't do us much good, will it?"

"It won't do us any good," said Chester.

"But," said Jean, "Duval must have thought of all that. He--"

"Duval knows as well as you or I what will happen to us should we assassinate the President," said Chester. "He will have that much more gold for himself."

"Still, we may manage to escape," said Jean hopefully.

"And if we do," said Chester sternly, "what then? Do you suppose Duval will keep faith with us? There will be such a hue and cry as Paris never heard before. Duval will turn us over to the authorities to save his own skin."

"If I thought that," said Jean, "I--"

"Besides," interrupted Chester, "we shall only be aiding the Germans, and not ourselves, and how long do you suppose the Apaches will be allowed to live should the Germans invade Paris?"

"Why--" began Jean, but Chester interrupted again.

"One of their first steps would be to annihilate us," said Chester. "They would ravage the city, tear it into little pieces. Remember, it is our own home, yours and mine. Would you like to see that?"

"No," replied Jean, "but--"

"No matter how you look at it," continued Chester, "you and I are sure to get the worst of it. Now, I don't know about you; but I am going to have nothing to do with the plot."

Jean did not reply for some moments, and they walked along in silence for several blocks. Finally the little man replied:

"But I have been ordered to shoot you if you fail to carry out your end of the work."

"In which event," replied Chester calmly, "you would also have to assassinate the President, and would yourself be killed."

"Then what am I to do?" cried Jean, now greatly alarmed.

"Follow my example, and have no hand in the matter," said Chester.

"It might be done," said Jean slowly, "for Duval himself will be present to-morrow, and, when he sees we have failed, he will do the deed himself."

"Then we must prevent that also."

"What! Why?"

"Because, should the President fall before any hand--yours, mine, Duval's or another's--we should still meet the same fate; for the city would be dragged by the troops and police and not an Apache left alive. No, the President must be warned."

"But that is treachery!" cried the little man.

"Is it treachery to save the President of your country from the hands of an assassin?" demanded Chester, and answered his own question: "No!"

The two paused on a street corner, and there, for perhaps ten minutes, Jean stood wrapped in thought. Finally he spoke, and there was a different tone in his voice.

"I believe," he said quietly, "that we have both learned a lesson. There must be in us, after all, a spark of loyalty. No! We cannot assassinate the President, nor can we stand idly by while he is shot down. He must be warned."

Chester grasped the little Apache by the hand.

"I knew I could make you see it that way!" he exclaimed. "Good! Now, come with me, and we shall give the warning at once."

"Where to?" demanded Jean.

Chester looked at him carefully a single moment, and a doubt of the man's sincerity came to him. Therefore he replied cautiously:

"Never mind. Just follow me; and if you mean what you say, warning shall be given at once."

For a moment Jean hesitated, then followed Chester down the street.

Chester's sense of direction now stood him in good stead. Not once in all his wandering about had he lost a general idea of where lay the Hotel de Ville, and he now steered a course in that direction. He finally came into view of the building, and here Jean hung back.

"What's the matter?" demanded Chester, as the little man stopped.

"We can't go in there," was the reply. "They won't let us speak. We'll be thrown into jail and kept there."

"Oh, no, we won't," said Chester. "Leave it to me. Come on."

A sudden suspicion struck Jean.

"Tell me," he cried, and grasped the lad fiercely by the arm, "are you a detective?"

"No," replied Chester calmly. "What made you think that?"

"I don't know," was the reply, "but the suspicion came to me and I could not down it. I will have nothing to do with a detective."

"Well," said Chester, "I am no detective; but"--he paused and laid his hand on Jean's arm--"I am a French army officer!"

"A spy!" cried Jean, and freed his arm.

"A spy, if you choose to call me one," said Chester, "but still your friend, for I believe you have come to your senses."

"I know," cried Jean, "you want to get me locked up!"

He stepped quickly backward, turned, took to his heels and ran.

Chester was after him like a flash, and as he ran he muttered to himself:

"Great Scott! I can't let him get away. He is sure to believe he has been imposed upon, and undoubtedly will warn the others!"

The little Apache was fleet of foot, but still not so fleet as was Chester. Within the block the lad overtook the fugitive and his hand grasped the other by the collar.

"Now," he said quietly, "you shall come with me, whether you will or not. I mean you no harm, and, if you do as I say, you will be all right."

Jean was not convinced, however, and continued his desperate struggles to free himself. But Chester was too strong for him, and with some difficulty he succeeded in dragging the little man back to the Hotel de Ville, and inside, where both were seized by half a dozen French troopers.

"Call General Gallieni at once," demanded Chester.

The officer in command laughed at him.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" he laughed. "Look who wants to see the general."

He motioned to two of his men, who started to drag the prisoners toward an open door, beyond which, as Chester surmised, lay cells.

Chester shook himself free with a single movement and turned upon the French captain.

"I am an army officer," he said quietly, "and am engaged in a piece of work at General Gallieni's own suggestion. You will summon him immediately."

The French officer was somewhat surprised at this, but he was not quite convinced.

"How am I to know that you speak the truth?" he asked skeptically.

"Because I say so," replied Chester quietly, taking a step forward.

The French officer also advanced a step.

"It is my belief that you seek the general for some ulterior purpose," he said with a sneer, and, before Chester realized what he was about to do, the officer raised his hand and slapped him soundly across the face. "Take them away," he ordered his men.

The blow in the face stung Chester to action.

With a quick spring he avoided the soldiers who would have seized him and leaped upon the French officer, whom he sent to the floor with a single blow of his fist. The officer rose slowly to his feet, drawing his revolver as he did so.

"You dog!" he cried, and raised his weapon.

But he did not fire, for at that moment there came from directly behind him the command in a ringing voice:

"Put down that weapon! What's the meaning of this?"

General Gallieni stood in the doorway. The officer turned and saluted.

"These dogs," he said, indicating Chester and Jean, who were now held by the soldiers, "insulted me. I refused to allow them to see you, and one of them struck me. I believe they came to assassinate you."

The general took a step back, for he had not recognized Chester.

"To assassinate me?" he exclaimed.

"You are wrong, General," said Chester quietly, "I have returned with information that will prevent the assassination of the President."

"Lieutenant Crawford!" ejaculated the general. "The President is to be assassinated, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"When?"

"At noon to-morrow, when he speaks on the Palace steps."

"And perhaps you know who has been selected to kill him?"

"Yes, sir; I do," replied Chester quietly. "I have, sir!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PLOT FOILED.

General Gallieni started back in great surprise.

"You to be the assassin?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir," replied the lad, "I was fortunate enough to draw the red ball in the den of the Apaches, sir."

The general advanced and took him by the arm.

"Come with me," he said, and led the way toward his private office.

Chester motioned for Jean to follow, and the little man did so, though plainly not without some trepidation.

"Who is that?" asked General Gallieni, pointing to Jean.

"He is the man who is to shoot me in case I fail to shoot the President," said Chester cheerfully.

"Hadn't we better have him thrown into a cell?"

"No, sir. We have agreed that it is not right to shoot the President, and I am sure that we can count on his help should we need it. It is likely to be valuable."

"Well," said the general, sinking into a chair and motioning the others to seats, "tell me all about it; and where, by the way, is your friend?"

"He is trailing Duval, sir."

"Good! Now, let's have the story."

Chester put the facts before the military governor as clearly and concisely as possible, and when he had concluded General Gallieni jumped to his feet.

"We must act at once!" he exclaimed, and pulled the telephone toward him.

"But not with too great haste, General," protested Chester, also rising. "We must first decide upon a plan."

"What do you mean?" asked the general.

"Why," said Chester, "if we hope to capture Duval--who will be on hand to-morrow, and who is likely to shoot the President himself--we must figure out the best means of doing so."

"I shall have the President cancel his engagement."

"That," said Chester, "might only delay the assassination."

"What would you suggest?"

Chester was silent for some minutes before he replied:

"If the President doesn't make his address to-morrow, his life probably will be attempted the next day or the next. If he does speak, Duval is sure to be on hand. Jean and I must be in the crowd, so that Duval may see us; for, if we are not there, Duval may suspect treachery and shoot

the President himself.

"Seeing us there, however, Duval will take no action himself. As the President's speech progresses, Duval will be waiting for me to fire. He will be continually thinking that I will do so in another moment.

"Now, I should say that this is the best way: Let the President cut his speech short, say to three minutes. The moment he ceases speaking, rush a heavy guard between him and the crowd and have him stoop immediately behind them. Realizing that the plot has failed, Duval may not fire; but, in the event that he does, we shall probably be able to spot him and get him before he can escape."

General Gallieni spent some minutes considering the feasibility of this plan. Finally he said:

"If we only knew Duval by sight, we could avoid all this by seizing him there before the Palace."

"The trouble is we don't," replied Chester dryly.

General Gallieni turned to Jean.

"Do you know Duval by sight?" he asked.

"I have never seen his face, sir," was the reply. "He has never appeared before us without his mask."

"Well, then," said General Gallieni, "we shall have to do the best we can. Now, you two go into the next room and get some sleep. I'll get the Prime Minister and explain the matter to him and to the President, that we may all act in accord."

Chester saluted the general, and, followed by Jean, made his way into the adjoining room, while the general proceeded to get busy on the telephone.

Chester turned to Jean and clapped him heartily on the back.

"Isn't this better than attempting to assassinate the President?" he asked.

Jean smiled back at him.

"It is," he said quietly. "And you may count upon me to the limit."

"Good!" exclaimed Chester. "I knew it."

He threw himself upon a little cot and was soon fast asleep. Jean followed his example.

Daylight was streaming into the room through the large French windows when Chester was aroused by a hand on his arm. The lad was upon his feet in an instant and faced General Gallieni. Immediately he turned and aroused Jean, who was still sleeping heavily.

"All is in readiness," said General Gallieni. "The President and the Prime Minister have been apprised of the plan, and it is to be acted upon as you suggested."

Chester produced his watch and glanced at it.

"Half-past ten," he said. He turned to the general. "Have you had any word from Hal?"

"Who?"

"Hal--Lieutenant Paine."

"No."

"By Jove!" said Chester. "I hope he hasn't gotten into any trouble."

Eleven o'clock came, and still no word from Hal.

At 11:15 Chester and Jean left the Hotel de Ville and made their way toward the Palace. A great crowd had already assembled when they arrived, and they had some difficulty in pushing their way through, so that they might get as close as possible to the spot where the President was to stand while delivering his address.

By the dint of hard shoving and pushing, and the use of their elbows, however, they were finally successful, and came to a pause near the foot of the steps, in the very first line of spectators. Beyond was drawn up an armed guard of perhaps a hundred soldiers. No one could approach closer.

Chester turned and surveyed the crowd. He thought it possible that Hal might be there some place, but, scan the faces as he would, he could see no sign of his chum.

The crowd was good-natured, and the people jostled and pushed and shoved each other jokingly.

Chester scanned the crowd once more, seeking to determine the figure of Duval, the Apache chief. Several times he thought he recognized the man by his peculiar build, but in each case he soon found another that looked just the same in the crowd.

Jean also, at Chester's request, had put his keen eyes to the test; but he was no more fortunate. However, both realized that, some place in that crowd Duval had his eyes on them.

In the distance came the faint sound of a bell, as a clock chimed the first stroke of the hour of noon; and, with the last stroke, the President of France appeared upon the steps of the palace.

A great roar of applause went up from the crowd and continued for fully five minutes; nor did it cease at once as the President advanced to the very edge of the uppermost step and raised a hand for silence.

Then, gradually, the sounds of tumult died down, and President Poincare opened his mouth and began to speak.

One, two, three minutes the President spoke, while all about reigned the silence of death; then, suddenly, at the expiration of the third minute, he stepped back suddenly, while at the same moment a long line of French soldiers stepped into place in front of him.

From the edge of the crowd, at the side nearest Chester and Jean, the stillness was suddenly shattered by the sharp crack of an automatic, and a soldier who stood before the President of France toppled in his tracks. Another stepped into his place, and the President was safe.

But, with the crack of the revolver the great crowd became a wild, howling mob. Shrieks, screams and cries of anger filled the air, and as a single man the crowd swooped upon the spot where a tall man with a smoking revolver in his hand was attempting to make his escape.

Chester, who had been prepared for the shot, sprang forward upon the instant, with Jean but a step behind him. Through the crowd they were forced to fight their way, but eventually they came to the edge of it, only to find that Duval, for such they were sure the would-be assassin was, had fought his way out and fled.

But, as the Apache chief ran, the crowd dashed after him. Chester now had his school days to thank for the fact that he was more fleet of foot than the others of the crowd. He passed them rapidly, as he ran after the flying figure of Duval, now at least 200 yards ahead of him down the street.

The lad raised his revolver as he ran and fired. But Duval did not halt. Chester had missed.

With the howling pack at his heels, and Chester gradually closing up the gap between them, Duval exerted himself to the utmost. Suddenly he turned into a narrow alley, where he halted. Chester, who was nearer than any of the others, dashed into the alley without slackening his speed, and, as he did so, Duval struck him a heavy blow in the face with the butt of his revolver.

Immediately he turned and dashed forward again.

Chester was not knocked unconscious by the force of the blow, but he reeled and fell to the ground. He was up in a moment, however, and with blood streaming from an ugly gash in his head, dashed after the fugitive once more.

Gradually Duval and his pursuer outdistanced the rest of the crowd. Chester was near enough not to be thrown off the track, as Duval rounded corner after corner; and, try as he would to shake off his pursuer, Duval was unable to do so.

At the next corner Duval darted into a little store, and out the other side, upsetting a group of men as he did so. Chester dashed in after him.

But here he encountered an obstacle. The group of men upset by Duval rose to their feet, very angry. At the sight of a second running man, not realizing the seriousness of the chase, they lined up and stopped the lad's progress.

Realizing it was no time for talk, Chester struck out right and left, and men dropped. But the rest closed in, and Chester went down. A heavy wrench was raised over his head and would have fallen on it.

But a newcomer caught the upraised arm. Chester looked up. It was Hal.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HAL IN PERIL.

Hal was unable to tell just what caused the great crash as, after releasing his hold on the window in the cellar of the house to which he had followed Duval he went down into space. His feet struck a projection of some kind, and the crash followed.

The lad struck the floor in a heap. Although he felt sure that the crash must have aroused everyone in the house, he lay perfectly still, listening. Above he could hear the sounds of footsteps, and directly a door, which he judged to be the door into the cellar from above, opened.

The head of Duval appeared in the doorway. In his hand he held a flashlight, and Hal could make him out plainly. A second face peered over his shoulder, and Hal recognized it instantly as that of the Apache's chief lieutenant, who had accosted them in the den.

"What was it?" asked the lieutenant.

"I don't see anything," was the reply.

At that moment a furry shape calmly ascended the stairs and stopped at Duval's feet. It was a black cat, which stopped to lick his right paw. Duval stooped down and examined him. Then he arose with a laugh.

"_Mon Dieu_!" he exclaimed. "It was the cat. He must have upset the jars of jelly and preserves. See, he is covered with it."

"By Jove! This is luck," muttered Hal to himself. "The cat must have been sleeping among them when I knocked them down."

He made no move, and directly the two men and the cat disappeared and the door closed with a bang.

Hal waited a few minutes, and then arose slowly to his feet. While Duval had held the flashlight, the lad had taken in his surroundings, and now he cautiously approached where he knew the stairway to be. His outstretched hand touched the rail and his foot found the lowest step. He ascended silently.

The knob turned under his hand, and the door swung back without even a creak. Inside was perfect blackness.

Hal closed the door softly behind him and stole along what seemed to be a long hall. He went very slowly, and finally his outstretched hand touched an obstruction. He felt it over carefully, and his hand touched a knob. It was another door.

Hal placed his ear to the floor and listened. There was no sound from beyond. He arose and tried the knob. The door opened and the light flashed into the lad's eyes, almost blinding him.

He paused uncertainly, and then, not being accosted, stepped in and closed the door behind him. His eyes were used to the light by this time,

and he looked quickly about him. He was in a bedroom.

The sound of voices came from the room beyond and approaching footsteps. The lad looked quickly about for a place of concealment, and the best that offered itself was the bed. Under this he dived swiftly and silently.

And none too soon. Duval and his lieutenant, followed by the black cat, came into the room, and sat down. Hal breathed silently.

"Well," said Duval, "everything is fixed. The money will be paid to us to-morrow night. Then we can take a ship for America, where we can enjoy the luxuries it will bring us."

"I'll be glad when it's all over," said his lieutenant. "This is ticklish business. You were lucky to get in with the Apaches."

"Rather," drawled his chief. "My height and general appearance, together with the fact that the former chief always wore a mask, have served us well. I wonder what the Apaches would do to us if they knew how I disposed of their real chief?"

His lieutenant laughed heartily.

"It would be no laughing matter if they were to find it out," said Duval.

"Perhaps not; still it is funny," was the reply.

The black cat jumped into Duval's lap, and he stroked it and talked to it. Then the animal began to claw at him.

"What's the matter, kitty?" asked Duval.

The animal cried and continued to claw at him.

"He wants to get down," said the other.

Duval released his hold on the cat, which immediately jumped to the floor and walked under the bed, to where Hal lay. The lad saw the animal coming, and reached out a friendly hand, thinking to keep it quiet.

But the cat's back bristled. Its tail grew to huge proportions, and it snarled and spat at him angrily.

"What do you suppose is the matter with the cat?" asked Duval.

"Sounds like he had found a dog under the bed," was the reply.

The hissing and snarling continued.

"Something wrong," said Duval. "Might as well have a look."

He dropped to his knees and peered under the bed, to where Hal was now defending himself against the attacks of the cat, which was striking at him with his sharp claws.

"See anything?" asked Duval's lieutenant.

"Man under the bed," replied Duval quietly. "Get out your gun and get on

the other side of the bed."

His lieutenant obeyed with alacrity, and each, with a revolver in his hand, looked cautiously under the bed. Then Duval stretched forth a hand and, seizing the cat by the tail, dragged it forth. At the same time he called out:

"Come out from under there!"

Hal saw that resistance, between two fires as he was, would be useless.

"All right," he called back.

He crawled forth slowly, but before he emerged he drew his two revolvers from his pocket and dropped them beneath the bed. He was thoughtful enough to realize that, should he manage to regain his freedom, the guns under the bed would come in handy.

The lad got slowly to his feet and faced the two criminals.

Both started back in surprise at sight of his face. They recognized him immediately.

"Choteau!" cried Duval.

His lieutenant also exclaimed aloud.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the Apache chief sternly.

"I just wanted to see where you lived," replied Hal quietly.

"Why?"

"Well, there has been so much talk about you, your being a gentleman, and all that, that I wanted to satisfy my curiosity."

"Well, your curiosity is satisfied. What now?"

"Nothing," said Hal briefly.

"I suppose you know," said Duval, "that now you have seen me without my mask you will never leave this house alive."

"I suppose that is your idea," said Hal.

"You'll find that I have the right idea."

"Tell us your real object in coming here," said Duval's lieutenant.

"I have told you," replied Hal.

"That," said the lieutenant, "is a lie. It's too absurd. I guess I'll search you."

He proceeded to do so while Duval kept Hal covered. There was not much to be found--but one thing that Hal feared he would discover and which he realized he should have dropped with the revolvers under the bed.

His searcher found it, drew it forth, and, with an exclamation of

triumph, held it up for Duval to see.

It was the police whistle General Gallieni had given him.

"So!" he exclaimed. "A police spy, eh! I thought so."

Hal shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you have me," he said. "What are you going to do with me?"

The two men laughed.

"I guess you won't be as much surprised at what we are going to do as the manner in which we are going to do it," replied Duval, with an evil leer.

"How?" asked his lieutenant. "Water?"

"Right," was his chief's reply. He turned to Hal. "This house," he explained, "is on the very bank of the River Seine. Perhaps you have skirmished about in the rear?"

Hal shook his head negatively.

"Well, such is the case. In the cellar is a neat little room of four solid walls--no windows. There is a slight crack at the bottom, and through this, by a contrivance of my own, I can let in the waters of the river. The door is solid, and, once locked in, you cannot get out. I believe that this is a fitting death for a police spy. What do you think?"

Again Hal shrugged his shoulders.

"One way is as good as another," he said briefly. Duval turned to his companion with a laugh.

"Quite a brave man we have here, eh?"

"Quite," returned the other. "However, I guess he'll change his tune when the water gets up to his neck."

"Right you are," was the reply. "But what do you say? Shall he not sup with us first?"

"A good idea!" exclaimed his lieutenant.

Hal had been thinking rapidly. The men still held their revolvers in their hands, but they no longer covered him. Taking advantage of this fact, Hal suddenly dived under the bed and his two automatics were once more in his hand.

But the two men were after him in an instant. Before he could turn and bring his weapons to bear they had him covered, while Duval cried out:

"Come out from there, or I'll put a hole through you."

Hal realized that he could not hope to dispose of his two enemies, so quickly shoving the two revolvers into his clothes, he once more emerged and got to his feet.

"What are you, an ostrich?" demanded Duval, with a slight smile. "Think if you get your head out of sight you are safe?"

Hal made no reply, but he felt considerably more comfortable with his two automatics reposing safely at hand.

"Well, we might as well give the doomed a little bite to hold him up," said Duval, with a smirk. "You guard him now while I see what the pantry has to offer. Keep him covered with your gun, for he is desperate and may jump you."

"I'll guard him, all right," was the reply.

"Good! Of course, it is easy enough to shoot him, but I would rather have him swim a while first."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FIGHT AND ESCAPE.

Duval returned a few moments later with sandwiches and milk, which he placed upon a table at one side of the room. He drew up three chairs and motioned the other two to seats. Then, with his revolver upon the table near him, he sat down himself.

"Don't stand on ceremony," he said to Hal. "This will be your last meal on earth, so you may as well make the most of it. Pitch in."

"Thanks," replied Hal, showing no sign of fear.

He picked up a sandwich and proceeded to eat it with apparent relish.

Light now filtered through a window at the far end of the room. Duval glanced at his watch.

"Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed. "I had no idea it was so late."

"What time is it?" asked Hal calmly.

"I can't see as it makes any difference to you," said Duval, with an evil leer. "You are not going any place. However, I'll tell you. It is now just ten minutes past eight."

Hal did not reply, and proceeded to finish his sandwich.

Finally, all the food having disappeared, Duval pushed back his chair and produced three cigars, one of which he offered to Hal and the other to his lieutenant.

"I don't smoke," said Hal; "thanks all the same."

"Suit yourself," replied Duval. "However, you may as well make yourself comfortable while we enjoy our cigars."

He puffed luxuriously, as did the other.

Hal also leaned back in his chair. He chafed under this restraint, but he realized that it would be foolish to make an effort to escape under the very mouths of his two captors' guns. Nevertheless, he was ready to take advantage of the first opportunity that should offer itself.

But none came.

Duval and his lieutenant, having disposed of their cigars, arose. The former, poking the muzzle of his revolver close to Hal's head, said sharply:

"Get up, now, and walk ahead of us. No tricks!"

Hal did as ordered, and, with the Apache chief's revolver prodding him in the back, left the room. At a command he went down the stairs to the basement.

"Turn to the right," instructed Duval.

Hal obeyed. At the far end of the cellar they came to a little room. Duval motioned Hal into it and followed himself, as did his lieutenant. The latter now kept Hal covered, while Duval tapped the walls with the butt of his revolver.

"Perfectly solid, you see," he said to Hal.

"I see," replied Hal.

Duval struck the open door several resounding blows.

"Also perfectly solid," he remarked. "If you had a gun now you might possibly blow the lock off, but, as you haven't, you will be safe enough."

He turned to his aide.

"You are sure he was not armed?"

"Sure. I searched him carefully."

"All right. Then there is no need to search him again."

With his revolver he covered the lad while he backed from the little room.

"Good-by," he said, and jumping out quickly, slammed the door closed.

"Good-by," Hal called after him, without a tremor.

"When the water begins to rise," shouted Duval, through the door, "you may lose some of your nerve. I'd like to stay and hear you cry for mercy, but I have other work to do. However, my friend here will stay in the house, and I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't hear you upstairs."

To this Hal made no reply.

He now turned his attention to an examination of the room in which he was confined. The walls rose on all sides to a height of perhaps

fifteen feet. This he had perceived while the door stood open, but inside now it was perfectly dark, except for a tiny stream of light that filtered in from below the walls, which failed to reach the floor by less than an inch.

The lad felt the walls carefully with his hands. They were perfectly smooth. He placed his fingers on the floor. It was dry.

He stood silent for some moments and then, becoming conscious of a strange sound, he again touched the floor with his fingers. They came away wet. Water was slowly trickling into the room.

The room was very small, and Hal realized that it would not take it long to fill. Therefore he decided on instant action.

When Duval, before leaving the lad to his fate, had mentioned revolvers, Hal had feared for the moment that he might be searched anew; but, when Duval had said a second search was not necessary, the lad breathed easier. His reference to blowing away the lock had not been lost on Hal, but the lad had already thought of that.

"Well," he said to himself, "the sooner I act the better. If Duval has left the house already I shall have but one to deal with. If I wait until I am sure he has gone, I shall probably be drowned. Here goes!"

Quickly he produced his pair of automatics, and, running his hand over the door, found the lock. He placed the muzzle of one automatic right up against it, and holding the other in his other hand, ready for instant use should he encounter a foe on the opposite side, fired.

In the narrow room the shot sounded like an explosion of a cannon, and the force of it shook the lad from head to toe. Smoke filled the little aperture, strangling him. He pressed his weight against the door. It did not yield. Something had gone wrong.

Again he placed his revolver against the lock, and fired quickly twice, and then hurled his weight against the door. It gave way before him, and the lad staggered from the smoke into the damp but fresher air of the open cellar.

There, inhaling great breaths of air the while, he listened for the sound of his enemies. Not a sound was to be heard. The lad reasoned this out for himself.

"The shots were probably muffled within," he said. "I doubt if they could have been heard very far. Now to get out!"

He made his way to the end of the cellar where he had entered in the night, and finally came upon the little window. Then he gave vent to an exclamation of dismay.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "I can't reach it!"

It was true. The window was so high above the ground that there was no way in which the lad could secure so much as a finger-hold. He looked around for some object upon which to stand, but he could find none.

"Well, I'll have to go out through the house," he told himself. "There is no help for it."

Slowly and silently he climbed the steps once more, and as silently opened the door. There was light in the hall, and the boy could make out which way to go. He turned toward the room in which he had been taken prisoner and entered softly.

There, stretched out on the bed, was the Apache chief's lieutenant. Duval himself was not to be seen.

Hal, with revolver ready, tiptoed into the room. He saw a revolver on the little table, and muttered to himself:

"Careless of him."

At that moment the man on the bed turned and slowly opened his eyes. A cry of terror escaped him, as his gaze rested upon Hal, whom he was morally certain was in a living tomb in the cellar.

"Ghost, go away!" he exclaimed.

Hal laughed loudly, and it was no ghost laugh, either. The man in the bed sat up.

"How did you get out of there?" he demanded, as if it were the most momentous question in the world.

"I blew the lock off the door," replied Hal calmly.

"But your gun? You had no gun."

"Oh, yes, I had," smiled Hal. "I had two of 'em, and I've got 'em yet. See?"

He pointed both straight at the head of his late captor.

"Now," he said quietly, "get up and get out of there."

"What are you going to do with me?" asked the man in alarm.

"Deliver you into the care of General Gallieni."

The Apache lieutenant slowly moved toward the edge of the bed and Hal lowered his weapons. This act almost proved the lad's undoing.

A second revolver suddenly flashed in the hand of the man in the bed, and he cried in a stern voice:

"Hands up!"

Hal, taken absolutely by surprise, could do nothing but obey.

"You see the tables are turned again," said the man in the bed pleasantly. "You should always remember that a man may keep one of his revolvers under his pillow."

Hal was crestfallen, and he showed it plainly. However, he still held his own weapons in his upraised hands, and he had no mind to release the weapons if there was any way in which he could avoid it.

"Put those guns on the table, and be quick about it," ordered his enemy and slipped from the bed to the floor.

Hal advanced slowly toward the table, and laid down the revolver he held in his right hand. The man in the bed took a step toward him. It was the moment for which the lad had been waiting and he acted instantly.

Slowly his weapon came down, and then it suddenly flashed in the Apache's face as the lad's hand pressed the trigger.

A miss was impossible. Hal had made up his mind that he would trifle with his opponent no longer. He realized fully that his own life depended upon his getting the upper hand and that it was no time to be squeamish.

Accordingly, when the opportunity presented itself, he fired pointblank in his opponent's face. The latter threw up his hands, gave out a single loud scream of pain, and toppled backward to the floor in a heap.

Hal bent over him. "Dead," he said simply. "Now to get out of this."

He left the house and made his way with all speed toward the Hotel de Ville. But he had not gone a block when he beheld, in a little store he was passing, a scene of confusion. The lad stopped and peered in. He made out Chester's figure and, instantly realizing his danger, dashed forward.

He arrived just in time to catch an uplifted arm that would have crushed Chester's head with a heavy wrench.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DEATH OF DUVAL.

"What's going on here?" cried Hal angrily, as he twisted sharply on the upraised arm.

The man who held the wrench writhed in pain beneath the lad's strong fingers and he dropped the wrench and turned on Hal angrily.

"What business is it of yours?" he demanded.

"I've made it my business," said Hal. "He is a friend of mine."

Unmindful of the threatening gestures of the others, he stooped and gently lifted Chester's head. The latter was not badly hurt, and he was soon upon his feet.

"Where did he go?" he cried excitedly.

"Where did who go?" asked Hal.

"Duval--the man I was chasing. He attempted to assassinate the President."

A cry of surprise went up from those surrounding the two lads, and they pressed forward with eager questions. No longer were they enemies of the

two lads. Word that an attempt had been made on the life of the President caused them to forget other troubles.

"He went that way," said one of them, pointing.

"After him," cried another, and the crowd dashed forward. Others of the mob that had given chase arrived by this time and also continued the chase.

"There is no use running after him," said Hal, as Chester also would have continued the pursuit.

"But we must get him!"

"I have an idea that I shall be able to find him," said Hal quietly.

"You know where he is?"

"I think I know where he will seek refuge."

Quickly he related his experiences to Chester.

"Come on, then," cried the latter eagerly. "Let's get away before he gets back, finds his friend dead and leaves the house."

The lads hurried forward and, by going directly toward the house, arrived there before the first of the crowd came into view.

Even as Hal had expected, Duval, believing that he had eluded his pursuers, made a detour and entered his home from a side entrance. From an upper window, a few moments later, he saw the first of the crowd. They had no idea he was in the house and went dashing by. He did not see the forms of the two lads across the street.

"I guess I'm safe enough for a while," he said to himself.

He made his way toward the bedroom, where he surmised his lieutenant would be sleeping. He entered the room, took a single look and staggered back.

His eyes had fallen upon the inert body of his aide.

Quickly he bent over him and felt his pulse.

"Dead!" he exclaimed.

He stood silent, struck by a sudden thought. Quickly he descended the steps into the cellar and approached the room where Hal had been left to die. The door was open and water trickled from within.

Duval uttered no word but, turning quickly, dashed up the steps. Once more he looked from the window, and the first figures upon which his eyes rested were Hal and Chester.

The boys, in the meantime, had halted the mad crowd and briefly explained that the object of their search was in the house. They were engaged in this occupation when Duval peered from the window the second time.

The Apache chief smiled grimly to himself. He produced his automatic and

aimed at the two lads. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"Crack!"

Hal's cap seemed to leap from his head, and instinctively all of the crowd ducked. Then, with a terrible roar, they charged straight at the house.

But Duval, standing in an upper window, emptied one automatic into the howling mob and then another.

The crowd drew back.

While all this was going on, Hal had led Chester to the window leading into the basement, and silently the lads lowered themselves through it. Then, as the mob raged without, they made their way up the steps, through the hall, and up a second flight.

There, at the head of the stairs, they paused. Before them were two rooms, and they were not certain in which the Apache chief had taken refuge.

"You take the one on the right, Chester," whispered Hal.

Chester nodded and they advanced, Chester toward the door on the right and Hal toward the one on the left. They opened the doors upon the same instant.

But Duval had heard sounds in the hall, and his quick wit had detected the ruse. Therefore, when the lads flung open the doors, there was no one to be seen in either room. They turned and stared at each other blankly, and as they did so a bullet whistled between them.

Duval, stepping from behind the door where he had been concealed, had opened fire on them.

"Down!" cried Chester, and dropped to the floor.

Hal followed suit.

Both raised their weapons, but Duval was not in sight, so they did not fire. Slowly they got to their feet again, and dashed into the room where they now knew the Apache chief to be.

Hal went first. As he cleared the doorway, he was met by Duval himself, who, with the butt of his revolver, dealt the lad a heavy blow on the head. Hal fell like a log.

But Chester had been right at Hal's heels and before Duval could raise his weapon to fire, or bring it down on the lad's head, Chester had clinched with him.

With his two arms beneath those of the Apache chief, Chester brought them up, and, reaching over his shoulder, clasped hands under Duval's chin.

But Duval was a powerful man, and broke this hold with ease, even as the lad exerted his utmost strength in an attempt to strangle his opponent.

Chester staggered back, but rushed into another clinch as Duval raised

his revolver. Ducking, Chester drove his fist to his opponent's chin, even as the latter pressed the trigger. The bullet whistled harmlessly over his head.

With a quick, upward stroke of his left arm, Chester sent his enemy's revolver spinning through the air. Deprived of this weapon, Duval sought to bring his greater strength to bear and overpower the lad.

Chester realized that in strength he was no match for Duval, and knew that what he lacked in this respect he must make up in agility and cunning.

Therefore, he slipped from his opponent's grasp, and, sidestepping, struck Duval a stinging blow just above the right ear. Duval staggered back, then came forward with a cry of rage.

The Apache chief realized the need of haste, for he could already distinguish the sound of heavy footsteps in the hall below. He hoped, by freeing himself from Chester, who had now grappled with him again, that he could gain a moment's advantage, jump into the next room, dash through the hall and descend by the rear before the crowd came upon him.

Accordingly, he exerted himself to his utmost, and Chester gave ground. Then the lad stepped suddenly backward, and Duval staggered headlong. Before he could recover his balance, Chester, getting a good start, hurled himself forward as he had been wont to do on the football field--but not in a tackle--and Duval, unable to entirely recover himself, found himself being pushed rapidly across the room.

In vain did he strike out at the lad with his one free arm. His blows fell short. Chester, with lowered head, continued to push, and Duval was unable to check this impetus.

Straight back and back the Apache chief was forced. Then his legs came into contact with something that caused him to cry out in despair. This something was the edge of the low window, and Duval realized in an instant that he was on the threshold of death.

But his cry came too late, and it is doubtful if Chester, thoroughly aroused as he was, would have released his victim anyhow. There was a sound of cracking glass, as Duval's head was forced against the window pane, and Chester, hearing it, released his hold and stepped back quickly.

And the lad stepped back none too soon. Another foot forward, and he, too, would have gone hurtling through the window to the street.

There was a screeching cry as Duval crashed head foremost through the window and went tumbling to the street below. He struck head first upon the hard sidewalk, crushing his skull; while a shower of glass crashed tinkling about him.

Immediately the crowd below surged about him, striking with weapons of all kinds at his defenseless body. Some even jumped and trampled upon it.

At this moment, from around a corner came a troop of cavalry, attracted by the news that the would-be assassin of the President had been cornered--for news of this kind travels swiftly--and now they rushed to the body of Duval, as eager to protect him as a moment ago they would

have been to slay him.

The crowd, with growls and shouted threats, drew off.

Upstairs Chester bent over the prostrate form of Hal and gently raised his chum's head to his knee. Slowly the lad opened his eyes.

"How do you feel, old man?" asked Chester.

Hal passed his hand over his head.

"Somewhat dizzy," he replied, "but where is Duval?"

"Dead, I guess," said Chester, "I tumbled him out the window on his head."

"Good! Am I hurt much?"

"No; the blow didn't even break the skin, but it has raised a pretty sizable bump on your head."

"All right, then. Help me up."

Chester lent a supporting arm, and Hal scrambled to his feet, where he swayed dizzily for a few seconds. Then the dizziness passed, and he walked toward the door with Chester.

Just as they were about to leave the room they stepped back to allow a newcomer to enter. The newcomer was General Gallieni, and he advanced with outstretched hands.

"You lads have proved your worth," he said, seizing each warmly by the hand. "And now, if you will lead us to the den of the Apache conspirators, your work will be finished."

"All right, General, follow us," said Chester.

He led the way downstairs.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE END OF THE TRAIL.

Hal, still somewhat dizzy, followed close upon the heels of his friend, and behind him came General Gallieni. In the street, at a command from the general, the lads halted, and the military governor dispatched an aide to summon a squad of cavalry.

"We might as well do this right," he remarked to the lads.

Ten minutes later the squad appeared, and the general, mounting his own horse, which had been standing by, placed himself at their head. Then he motioned the lads to climb up before two of the soldiers and point out the way to the den.

This the lads did, and soon the squad was trotting briskly along the streets.

Some distance from the rendezvous Hal called a halt, and jumped lightly to the ground. Chester and General Gallieni also dismounted.

"I believe it would be a good idea for my friend and I to go first," said Hal to the general. "We are still in our Apache togs. One of your men can come with us, so as to be able to point out the way. Then he can return and bring you. In the meantime we can see that the door is left open."

General Gallieni assented to this plan, and Hal, Chester and one soldier made their way forward.

Hal recognized the little frame house at once, but just as he was about to enter a figure stole softly across the street and took Chester by the arm.

It was Jean.

"You won't be able to open the door in the passageway," he said in a low tone.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Chester. "How do you happen to be here?"

"I expected that there would be a raid," was the reply, "and I came to help you. You had better let me take the lead."

"All right," said Chester, and he explained the situation to Hal.

Jean now took the lead, and they entered the house. Once more they traversed the dark passageway, and Jean opened the door in the dark and led the way to the room beyond. Here Hal motioned for the soldier to return and bring the others--the door had been left open--and the trooper hurried away.

Hal approached the room and knocked sharply on the door--three light taps, followed by one loud tap. There came to their ears the sound of a scraping chair, the door was unbarred and unbolted, and Georges peered through. He recognized the three figures in the passageway, and threw wide the door.

"Successful?" he asked eagerly as the three entered.

"Yes," said Chester briefly.

"_Bien_!"

The others in the room, of whom there were perhaps fifty, also crowded around and patted Chester and Jean on the back, profuse in their congratulations.

The three sat down at the table, where Chester, in response to Georges' request, began an account of the supposed assassination.

"I suppose the chief will soon be here," he broke off to say.

"And then," said Georges, rubbing his hands, "we shall receive our gold. Did you see the chief in the crowd?"

"Yes; he was there, all right," said Chester.

Now came to Chester's ears the sound of stealthy footsteps in the passageway beyond the door, which Georges had barred and bolted immediately they had entered. The lad got nonchalantly to his feet and walked slowly toward the door.

Hal and Jean also had heard the sound of footsteps, and they now ranged themselves on either side of Chester.

Suddenly the revolvers of all three flashed out and covered the crowd of Apaches, as Chester's voice rang out sternly:

"Throw up your hands, all of you!"

Taken completely by surprise, the Apaches obeyed.

Without lowering his weapons, Chester called to Jean:

"Open the door!"

Jean sprang to obey, and as he did so the Apaches, realizing that they were trapped, sprang toward the two lads with cries of rage. Right in the face of the muzzles of the four automatics they came on.

"Halt, or we fire!" cried Chester.

Jean was struggling nervously with the door.

The Apaches paid no heed to the lad's cry.

"Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!"

The automatics of both lads spoke four times in rapid succession, and as many men fell to the floor. For a moment the Apaches fell back. In this moment Jean swung wide the door, and, picking up his revolver, rushed to the side of the two lads, while through the door streamed, one after another, the squad of French cavalrymen.

Some of the Apaches now produced revolvers and fired wildly at the approaching soldiers, and these, leveling their rifles, returned the fire.

Immediately the den became a scene of tumult. Wounded men screamed and others gave vent to their rage with fierce cries. Revolvers and rifles flashed on all sides.

Hal and Chester, immediately the firing had begun, had dropped to their knees, and so, as they still poured lead into the Apaches, the bullets of the latter went over their heads. Jean, however, was not so fortunate.

Realizing that there must have been treachery some place, Georges had naturally come to the conclusion that Jean was responsible for it, and had singled the little man out as his own particular mark. Paying no heed to the fighting that raged about him, he took careful aim and fired.

Jean gave a single cry, threw up his hands and fell squarely between Hal and Chester.

But the fight could have but one outcome. Outnumbered two to one, the Apaches were fighting a losing struggle. Half of their number lay dead on the floor, and many others were nursing serious wounds. As suddenly as it had begun, the fighting ceased, and the Apaches still on their feet raised their hands in the air.

Immediately the soldiers advanced on them and made them prisoners. Each was bound securely and hustled out of the door.

Chester and Hal were not wounded. The former now bent over the body of Jean, in whom he saw there was still a spark of life. He lifted the little man's head gently, and, as he did so, Jean looked at him and spoke:

"Well, they got me," he said quietly. "I thought they would."

"You will be all right in a day or two, Jean," said Chester.

"You can't fool me," was the reply. "I know when I am done for. But I am glad that, before my time came, you were able to put me on the right path. It is better to die thus."

Chester did not reply. There was nothing he could say.

Jean looked at him and smiled, then reached out his hand and clasped Chester's.

"It's all right," he said, pressing the lad's hand; "but let me give you a word of warning. Do not let any of these Apaches know your real identity. Their arm is long and they never forgive. Good-by."

He pressed the lad's hand, gave a single shudder and his grasp relaxed. Chester rose to his feet and turned to Hal.

"He is dead," he said quietly.

Leaving the body of Jean to be disposed of with the others, the lads made their way outside, to where General Gallieni stood. The latter greeted them with a smile.

"Well, we have finished it up," he said cheerfully, "and thanks to you two lads. I can see now why General Joffre has such confidence in you."

The lads flushed with pleasure at this compliment, but neither replied. They merely bowed.

"Now," said General Gallieni, "you shall come with me."

"Where to, sir?" asked Chester.

"Never mind," was the laughing rejoinder. "Mount two of those horses and follow me."

Without further questions the lads obeyed, and, after half an hour's ride, found themselves before the Palace where so recently the attempt on the life of the President of France had been foiled.

General Gallieni dismounted and motioned the lads to follow him, which

they did, going up the steps and entering the Palace itself. Here General Gallieni gave his name to an attendant. The latter disappeared, but returned a few moments later and bowed.

General Gallieni, closely followed by Hal and Chester, passed within the next room. There a man in civilian attire, bearded and with flashing eye, advanced to meet them.

"Allow me to present to you, sir," said General Gallieni, with a flourish, "Lieutenants Paine and Crawford, sir."

Both lads bowed low, for the man who advanced toward them with outstretched hand was Raymond Poincare, President of France.

"I am greatly indebted to you boys," said the President, "for the aid you have rendered me; but I am still more indebted for the service you have rendered France."

He spoke at length to the two lads, and finally informed them that they might withdraw, as he had matters of importance to discuss with General Gallieni.

"Well," said Hal to Chester, when they were again on the outside, "what shall we do now?"

"I guess we might as well hunt up our mothers," was Chester's reply.

Accordingly they turned and hurried in the direction of the hotel where, the evening before, they had outwitted Uncle John.

Uncle John was standing just inside the entrance of the hotel. He glanced at the lads as they entered, but, as they were still in their Apache togs, and were ragged and dirty, he did not recognize them. Chester approached him, and in a wheedling voice said:

"Will you give a poor orphan lad a small piece of money, sir?"

The hand of Uncle John, ever generous, immediately went into his pocket, and he placed a franc in the boy's hand.

At that moment one of the hotel officials, perceiving the two dirty lads, and mistaking them for street urchins, approached.

"Were these little beggars annoying you, sir?" he said to Uncle John. "I'll have them kicked into the street."

"Oh, let them alone," said Uncle John, but the official, mumbling that it was against the rules of the hotel, summoned a porter and ordered him to throw the lads out.

"Are you going to let them kick us out, Uncle John?" asked Chester, in English.

Uncle John turned quickly, and walked straight up to him. Stooping he gazed searchingly into his face and then turned to Hal. With an exclamation he waved aside the porter and grasped each lad by the arm.

"You young rascals!" he said. "Don't you know you have worried your

mothers nearly to death. You'll come with me now."

He led them to the elevator, and soon the two lads were once more in their mothers' arms.

"Well," said Uncle John, when the greetings were over, "I don't think you will get away from us again. We'll sail for America at once."

"I am afraid," said Chester slowly, "that we cannot go."

"Cannot go? And why not, sir?"

"Because," replied Chester, "I believe that Hal and I shall return immediately to the front, and rejoin General French and his heroic British troops."

Both Mrs. Paine and Mrs. Crawford cried out in alarm, and Uncle John looked at the two lads with disappointment when Hal said:

"Chester is right."

But Uncle John was nothing if not a diplomat.

"We won't discuss it now," he said, with a wave of his hand. "To-morrow we will talk the matter over."

This suited all concerned.

"And that decision having been reached," continued Uncle John, "let's all go down to dinner!"

THE END.

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